

LET'S GET PERSONAL

SEVEN HELPFUL KEYS FOR SHARING GOOD NEWS IN A POST-PANDEMIC, POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD



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This book is dedicated to my mom, the first Bible worker I ever knew, and to the millions of Jesus followers who share Him with others without pay or prestige, only because they understand that witnessing is not about discovering their purpose but fulfilling His.

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Introduction

*A personal invitation is the reason
why you are reading this book.*

How did it happen? Let me tell you.

In the 1950s in Cuba, Juan Hernandez was a barber from a military family, and also a baker. His entrepreneurial spirit allowed Juan, along with his wife, Estela, and their six children to have a life they enjoyed on a beautiful island in the Caribbean that was more prosperous than many others in the region.

One day, all the life they knew came crashing down, and the country was divided and disheartened. People were concerned about the direction of the government, but Juan was a steady influence in the community.

Some friends of the family invited one of their sons, then another, to come to a small but growing church community not too far from their home. The children went, loved the community, and in turn invited Juan and Estela, who joined soon after.

Their newfound faith was life changing. They wanted everyone in their home to experience the transforming power of the gospel.

The next step was to invite the rest of their children. Pascual, who was one of the youngest, was invited to come to church, but he declined. His lifestyle was more important to him than religion. Baco, as they called him, a name based on a Greek god who drank too much wine, lived up to his nickname. He drank heavily, smoked three packs of cigarettes a day, and had a big Cuban cigar almost every day.

Roger Hernández

Juan didn't push his son. He prayed. He gave Pascual a Bible and asked him if he would read it. He did. At night Baco would close his door, light up a cigarette, and read the Bible.

I have often said that the most dangerous thing for your bad habits is the Word of God. That's why the devil wants you away from the Bible, because the Bible keeps you away from the devil.

Baco learned that God changes individuals, and, frankly, he was tired of his lifestyle, the weekly bar fights and the three times he had to go to the hospital to be treated for issues related to his drinking. He decided, *"I want Jesus and want to get baptized in the Seventh-day Adventist Church."* So, he made his way down to the church on a Friday night and noticed that more than thirty individuals were already there for what seemed to be some type of rehearsal. The people at church were practicing for the baptism they were going to participate in the next morning. He did what he felt was the right next step. He joined the line and asked the pastor to baptize him as well.

To his surprise, the pastor responded with, *"Who are you? No, you may not be baptized tomorrow."*

Pascual tried to explain that he had been studying the Bible for more than a year, to no avail. The pastor explained that he would have to study with someone from the church *"for a long time"* before being allowed to become a member.

What happened next was very unusual. Pascual said goodnight, went home, went to sleep, came back to church the next morning, and snuck into the line of people to be baptized. When the pastor realized what was happening, he was already in the pool!

Pascual was baptized.

Some months passed, and a recruiter from an Adventist college came to the congregation, asking if anyone was interested in go-

Introduction

ing to the Adventist college. Pascual had been feeling the call to take his responsibility deeper, so he went to study theology at Colegio de las Antillas.

There he met and married Ana.

They had a baby.

Hello. I am Roger, and I am that baby.

I became a pastor. Got married to Kathy.

Had a baby.

She became a pastor. She had a son, who went into building things and has a passion for blessing people, and two foster daughters, who became like our own, rounded out our family, and improved our lives forever.

This brings us to the present day.

You are reading this book because someone back in the 1950s cared enough to share life and Jesus with my grandparents. It changed the trajectory of our lives forever.

I have made it my life's mission to pay the favor forward. For decades I have shared the gospel all over the world as a pastor, church planter, conference and union departmental leader, and a neighbor and friend. I remain convinced that the best way to share Christ in a post-pandemic, post-Christian culture is still the same as it was in 1950, or 1150, or AD 50. Simply said, it's just one beggar telling another where to find bread.

This book is designed to help you understand the personal privilege you and I must share. Adventism can be summarized in two words: Helpful Truth. Both of those words are significant. A truth that is unhelpful is just intellectual assent but no life change. Helpful accolades that make you feel good but aren't based on

truth will leave you with terrific self-esteem but little transformation. It's the combination of the two elements that changes a person in God's way.

This book has two parts:

- 1. Seven Keys.** In a world that no longer revolves around what happens in a building once a week, this section will help you understand and implement a faith that is too good not to share.
- 2. Relational, introductory Bible studies.** As you will find out, the best sharing happens in relationships. Sharing the Bible as not just a theological book but a living Word that addresses your real problems with real solutions from a real God is life altering. These introductory Bible studies will open conversations that translate into deeper study.

Many years have passed since the original invitation was made to my grandfather to join a group of believers that had Jesus and His hope at the center. My grandpa is resting now, awaiting his reward—he died when he was close to 100 years of age. It's up to us now to share Jesus with as many people as we can, as effectively as we can, in as short a time as we can.

Let's go!

Chapter

We Have a Problem

The fastest-growing religious group in North America is that of people with no religious affiliation. Pollsters call these individuals the “Nones” because, when asked about their religious affiliation, they respond with “none.” In the past twenty years, they have become nearly one in four people in this country, and the number is growing.

“You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times.”

—2 Timothy 3:1

This phenomenon is especially noticeable among younger generations: “In two studies conducted by both the Barna Group and USA Today, it was found that nearly 75 percent of young Christians leave the church after high school” (“Why Are So Many Young People Walking Away from Faith?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/Espanol/desercion.html>, my translation).

To understand this, one of the first things you must do is define

reality. I like the way an ancient philosopher put it: “*What is, is.*” It is not what I wish it to be, not what it used to be, and not what it will be. At this moment, Christianity in this world is in crisis. That’s what it is. You should be concerned but not defeated. You must not lose faith.

Some churches are reaching out to the “*Nones.*” Initiatives, strategies, and decisions leading them to Jesus and His final message for this generation are happening. People still have interest in spiritual things. But the church seems to be in a different category.

There are some interesting developments. According to one article, “*Today, one in three Gen Z adults aged 18 to 25 say they believe in a higher power, according to new polling from Springtide Research Institute, and that’s up from one in four in 2021. Gen Z-ers and religious leaders alike tell The Post that more young people are open to spirituality, but many of them are rejecting traditional religious labels in favor of more fluid groups that consider themselves non-denominational or interdenominational—accepting to all Christian denominations, but not adhering to the dogma of any particular one*” (*Rikki Schlott, “Gen Z ‘More Spiritual’ than Millennials—Yet More Suspicious of Denominations,” <https://ny-post.com/2023/05/27/why-gen-z-is-more-spiritual-and-religious-than-millennials/>*). If we believe that church is the starting point, we will miss a whole generation that sees institutions as outdated and irrelevant. That’s why I am making the case in this book that we must become smaller to grow. Think personal, not pew.

Let me start with a story that will illustrate this point more clearly. I love flying. I understand that some people see airplanes as anxiety factories. I am not one of them. One of the benefits of flying is that you can focus on your work. I actually wrote part of this book on a plane.

When our family lived in Oregon, I frequently traveled with United Airlines. I liked traveling with them and their partner airlines.

We Have a Problem

A few years ago, we moved to Georgia. Upon moving to Atlanta, we decided to switch airlines because United didn't have direct flights in our area, they all made stops in Charlotte, and no one wants to stop in Charlotte, at least not on purpose. Before making a decision about what airline, I did four things:

1. I checked the internet for different airline options.
2. I asked my friends about their experiences.
3. I personally tried a couple of airlines.
4. I flew with a friend. My best friend. My wife.

While going through this process, I received a promotion from Delta Airlines in the mail, inviting me to join the frequent flyer program with a credit card subscription that significantly increased accumulated miles for future trips. In 2012 I chose Delta, and it became my preferred airline. I have been with them for more than a decade now, and while it's not perfect, they treat me well, and do for me what United never did.

What does this have to do with religion, Christianity, Adventism, or evangelism? Glad you asked. There are several similarities. People who are interested in religion and church in your community will likely follow three or four steps similar to mine when I was looking for a new airline.

1. **They will search for information** about churches and your church online first. They will examine different religious options. I ask you, how clear and accessible is your church's website? What is your presence on social media? Some churches have websites that look like they're stuck in the 1990s. The problem with the internet is that it's not neutral. What is not working in your favor affects you.
2. **They will ask their friends** about their experiences at the

church. This is key and has its dangers, because people who had a bad experience (*e.g., at a restaurant*) will tell sixteen people about it, but they will only share their good experience with two people. In the era of social media, it's much easier for people to share the coldness they experienced when they arrived at your church rather than positive experiences. I don't like it, but it is what it is. This means that in order to reach more people you need to make more friends who aren't Christians.

- 3. They will join a small group** or a church-adjacent program before they attend your church. That's why we must provide other gatherings, smaller, outside of our worship hour on the Sabbath.
- 4. Depending on their generation, they may eventually attend** a couple of different churches before making their decision. If this visit is with a friend (*notice the trend*), that will increase the probability that they will choose to continue attending. The age of people just showing up unaccompanied and staying is likely part of the past.

This weekend, visitors will come to your church, and they will have other churches in mind while comparing yours to other religious experiences. Who did you invite? How can you become acquainted with them so they return? Most people don't connect or leave a church; they connect and leave people. This means you! Let's get personal.

Returning to my experience as a frequent flyer, when Delta sent me a promotion to choose them as my preferred airline, that brochure had an assumption. What was it? The airline assumed that I fly. All they had to do was design a promotional campaign to convince me that I should fly with them.

That has an inherent problem. What about people who don't fly?

We Have a Problem

Millions of people don't board planes, and millions more only do it occasionally. How do you think a promotional ad from Delta is received by people who don't fly? What about those who think flying causes a lot of stress, that airports have a lot of "drama," or who have been mistreated by airlines or other passengers? They would probably throw the promotion in the trash.

Those are the "Nones," the ones who don't fly. They have no interest in "flying" because they had bad experiences, or don't see the point, or have never been exposed to the wonder of flying. According to a Gallup Poll, trust in churches and religious institutions is at an all-time low of 31 percent (*Lydia Saad, "Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508169/historically-low-faith-institutions-continues.aspx>*). That should inform our strategy, approach, and interaction. The score of the game is not zero-zero right now. We are not starting on a level playing field, much less with the societal advantage we used to have. We are down two goals to nothing to start the game. This means we can still win, but there's no time to waste in petty intrasquad quibbles. We need all hands on deck, all engaged and working together.

If you are an executive at Delta, the first step is not to try to convince people to join your frequent flyer program but to help them understand the advantages of flying. How can we share with the "Nones" the powerful and transformative Adventist message? For that, we must start with the beginning of our movement.

How did we get here?

Our evangelism started the last century with certain realities:

- A substantial portion of North America subscribed to the Christian faith or was at least associated with it.
- People believed that the Bible was an important document containing divine truths.

- Many North Americans believed in the existence of God, that His Son was named Jesus, and that He came to die for our sins.

Based on these realities, Adventist evangelism focused on presenting twenty or more doctrinal points to teach that there was a better option. (*Delta is better than United.*) Since we know you “fly,” why not choose the best possible experience? Since you believe there is a God, and Christianity is the religion, why not choose the version of Christianity that adheres most closely to the Bible? That strategy worked well for us. Millions of people have come to know Jesus and His truth that way.

That world no longer exists. However, our church continues to use many of the same assumptions from the last century. The reality is that Christianity, especially among young people in North America, has taken a different path in the past twenty-five years. The change in the faith of people should be a cause for concern and consideration for us. Let’s consider some of these changes below.

Changes in Faith Practices

These statistics reflect all Christian religions, but it’s essential to note that it also affects our church:

- Consistent church attendance decreased.
- Regular Bible reading plummeted.
- The percentage of young adults who don’t attend any church has increased in the past two decades.
- Trust in the Bible has declined, and so has the trust for religious institutions.

The prophecy that Paul shared with Timothy about “*difficult times*” in the last days is being fulfilled before our eyes.

We Have a Problem

In addition to these statistics, consider the reality of our church's growth in North America. Your local church grows from four sources:

1. **Biological:** children who grow up in the church and decide to be baptized when they reach the appropriate age.
2. **Transfer:** members who move or immigrate from another country and request their transfer to your church.
3. **Prodigals:** individuals who were once Christians, even Adventists, who left but return later.
4. **Conversion:** people who were never affiliated with any religion—not Catholic, not Christian, never believed in God until the gospel reached them. The “*Nones*” largely belong to this group.

Examine the new members in your church. How many of them belong to category number four? Do you see the problem? The “*Nones*” are the ones who are growing the most, but we are baptizing them the least. You don't need a Harvard PhD to understand that this is a problem.

As I said before, I share this data so that together we can seek solutions, not fall into depression. The problem is not that we are not working, but that we are not working according to Christ's method, and we have drifted away from teaching Christ's teachings. Jim Puttman often says:

Christ's method + Christ's teachings = Christ's results

When we don't see Christ's results in our local congregations, the problem lies in either neglecting Christ's method or Christ's teachings. The good news is that both problems can be fixed. There is still time.

My proposed solution based on research, my personal experience

as a local church pastor, and now an evangelist is that we need to get personal. That will drive discipleship and growth in the foreseeable future.

Lets.

Get.

Personal.

Discussion Questions

1. When you see the statistics concerning religious affiliation, what worries you more? What gives you hope?
2. How would you rate the social media and online presence of your local church, from 1 to 10?

3. What strategies have you found helpful in sharing your faith with young people?
4. What strategies have you found unhelpful?
5. Can you write the names of 1–3 individuals you love who are disconnected from church right now and pray for them after reading each chapter of this book?

Chapter

I'm Confused

“Wait . . . I’m confused.” If you have ever been around teenagers or read Facebook comment sections, you have probably heard this expression. It’s common because it’s true.

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.’”

—Matthew 16:13–17, NIV

If one characteristic defines the age we live in, it is . . . confusion.

Things we took for granted have become odd. Societal norms of decency and respect have been replaced with partisanship and strife. From religious adherence to political perspective or sexual expression, we live in a time of unprecedented confusion.

Which is odd.

Because we always assumed that information eliminates confusion.

Yet it hasn't. In fact, confusion has increased. People used to choose their sources of news. Now they pick their version of the truth. *"I did my research"* many times means that because they have access, they also have authority. Unprecedented information. Unprecedented access. Unprecedented confusion.

Confusion has even impacted the religious perspective of society. We've seen how people have exchanged biblical values for either the desire to be fully accepted by the culture or have the power to be an enforcer of a religious one.

This confusion may confuse you, and it may seem to be a rather new phenomenon, but it is not. Confusion is not new and shiny like an Android (*iPhones are evil*); in fact, it is older than a rotary phone.

Note the original passage at the heading of this chapter. *"Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'"*

Jesus asks a simple question and gets a complicated answer.

"Who am I?" Simple. Clear. Easy. Right? Wrong!

"Well, Jesus, some say . . . others say . . . still others say . . ."

Confused. Unclear. Unable to respond clearly to a foundational question.

"Jesus, You could be . . . John the Baptist." Maybe that means someone famous (or infamous) who was their contemporary.

Elijah. Definitely a popular, unique, and significant figure, who evoked nostalgia for better days.

Jeremiah, or some of the others. A conglomerate of leaders who did great things that can be admired but could not save your soul.

I'm Confused

Could be this. Could be that. Some say this. Some say that. Thanks for asking, Jesus, but we're all confused.

I am fascinated at Jesus' response to the response. Since the question is about Himself, He could have gone into a diatribe about His qualifications, could have cursed the people, or at worst, could have left them to their confusion, abandoning them as a hopeless case.

He does none of those things.

He uses a three-pronged approach:

1. He's acts curious, so He asks more questions.
2. He comes closer to one of the disciples and calls Him by name.
3. He commands the church to move forward, not cower in fear.

That simple, straightforward strategy still works today.

And God wants to use you to share with others the wonderful, hopeful message of the gospel.

You, my friend, are God's response to the confusion. Jesus asks you as He asked Peter: *"I know what others are saying about Me, but what about you?"*

Unclear followers are confusion amplifiers.

But . . . clarity is honoring to God and attractive to unbelievers.

The world we live in is much different from the one Jesus lived in, yet it is as confused as it ever was. What others see as a problem to be avoided, I hope you see as possibilities to be engaged.

I wrote a book several years back called *Everyone Welcome*. It was

designed to help churches create spaces where people who are far from God can find truth, fellowship, and connection. My hope as I wrote it was that churches would become more like incubators and less like omelet makers.

Those principles have served churches well; many have used them in their churches. While I believe those principles can still make a difference with the people whom God brings to our local houses of worship, I have also noticed that people need a more personal approach to what happens during the other 165 hours we are away from the building. This book is a kind of prequel to what happens before people get to church.

In case you haven't noticed, the world has changed. Church attendance is down, and yet interest in spiritual things remains high. Expecting people to show up to a building to engage in religious services doesn't work as well as it once did, but engaging people where they live always will.

The emphasis needs to shift to a more personal approach to our witness. Evangelism of the future will be smaller, more personal, will take longer, and require a higher level of commitment from the person sitting in the pew to see it through. Expecting the mailman or woman to do our job for us is not only unbiblical but also unwise. Sending 25,000 flyers in the mail won't be as effective as having twenty-five members who regularly and intentionally invest time and resources in inserting themselves into the lives of the people in their communities long term.

I approach this book with a single thesis:

“Being Adventist makes your life better and makes you better at life.”

How does that quote sit in your heart?

This quote has been #facts in my life and my family. To be fair, I

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understand that this may not be the experience of all, but I can only testify to what has happened to me as a result of following Jesus and understanding the gospel emphasis of Adventism.

It has made my life better, and it has made me better at life.

Reading that line is interesting to me, because both my worst moments and my best ones have happened in the context of Adventism. Today I rejoice with the truth and wholeness of my Adventist beliefs. But it wasn't always that way.

Let me tell you a story.

I grew up in church. I won't say I was born in church, because my mom did go to the hospital for my delivery, but I was in church almost immediately. Church was a way of life for us. My dad was a pastor, so I was born into a pastoral family. My dad took care of seven churches and a school, and my mom stayed home and took care of us. Both of my parents were committed to seeing us succeed, and that included a rigorous diet of religious exposure.

We went to church a lot.

My dad had to attend and lead church services at least five to six days of the week. My brothers and I heard him preach hundreds of sermons. We went to a religious school, where we had even more exposure to religious teaching. Add the two times a day we had worship in our home, and you can see that there was no lack of biblical information. I was immersed in it. I sang in a gospel group, camped with Pathfinders, and had the distinct title of being the pastor's kid.

And yet . . .

I went clubbing, smoked weed, watched porn, and had sex outside of marriage.

Often all in the same twenty-four-hour period.

It was sort of a spiritual schizophrenia. Truth be told, it was driving me nuts. I could not enjoy the world because I went to church, and I could not enjoy church because of the spiritual effects of my almost nightly escapades.

Talk about confusion.

How could this happen? That's a great question. How can someone be so immersed in religious culture and so far from God? I do think that Ty Gibson was right when he said that *"religion is a great place to hide from God."*

Looking back, I believe the answer for my spiritual malaise is summarized in one word: Jesus. Or, better said, the lack of Jesus.

I never understood the gospel found in Jesus, yet I could recite the names of the sixty-six books of the Bible in order. I could recount the eschatological timeline, but I had no assurance I would be one of the ones standing at the end of that timeline. The gospel wasn't real, and neither was my transformation.

I was confused. And lost.

I was fed a steady diet of spiritual meals that always had one ingredient: "and"

It was Jesus and my effort.

It was the gospel and present truth.

It was the cross and my commitment.

The only way to keep this type of faith alive is with constant *"revivals"* that center on the stuff I needed to leave completely and less on the person I needed to love absolutely. I believe that my leaders and parents meant well and did the best they could, but meaning well does not mean being accurate.

At seventeen I had had enough. I took my confused self and start-

I'm Confused

ed to operate under the assumption that if I am going to be lost anyway, I am going to be really lost.

But the problem with leaving God is that the devil overpromises and under-delivers. He can create nothing, so he imitates the gifts of the Father by providing cheap alternatives to the gospel. Those who believe there is freedom outside of the religious “chains” they have started to unlock should be mindful of this truth. Sometimes we exchange one jail cell for a differently decorated one. Only in Jesus is true freedom found.

Several years passed, but my emptiness never went away, until it did. I made my way back home. Several factors played into my return to Jesus and the life transformation that only He can give.

His grace.

My mother.

In the Bible there is a story called The Prodigal Son, in which a son leaves and then returns home. When he comes back home, his father could say, “*I told you so,*” but he actually says, “*I love you so.*” That was my mom. When I came home late on Saturday nights, she was waiting for me in her rocking chair, available but not judgmental. I could see the pain in her eyes. That changed something inside of me.

Loren.

He came to my room in college and woke me up on Saturday (*Sabbath*) mornings when I didn't want to go to church after a late Friday night when I was living it up. He even threw water at me to wake me up, which I didn't appreciate, but woke me up enough to take my butt to church. God, I want to thank you for friends who stay close even when You feel far away.

A teacher.

He connected the dots and helped the gospel travel the longest eighteen inches in the world, from my head to my heart. God used his lesson on the book of Romans to unlock the gospel, and I have never been the same.

Since that day when I came home for good, I have made it my life's mission to help other people to have the same experience. After multiple decades in ministry, I can look back with amazement at what God has been able to do through a previously angry, addicted, and antagonistic young man. As my friend Jesse Wilson says, "*We are best equipped to reach the person you used to be,*" and I believe that to be true.

Which brings us to this moment, and the book you have in your hands.

You picked up this book because you are interested in becoming more effective in reaching others with the gospel. Maybe you are worried that your own children have decided to disconnect, and you are wondering how to help. Maybe you are a new believer, on fire for Jesus but with little instruction. Probably you have questions like these:

- It seems that some of the strategies we are using are not yielding the expected results. What can we do differently without compromising biblical principles?
- How can I share my faith without alienating others?
- I am not very knowledgeable about the Bible. Can I be effective at witnessing?
- What is working in a post-pandemic, post-Christian setting?

I'm Confused

- Is it impossible to reach the next generation?
Should we just take our ball, go home, give up, and just hope for the best?

It is my hope that the reading of this book will help you and yours to develop the three characteristics of a winsome witnesser:

Curious.

Close.

Christ-centered.

The people whom God misses the most are worth sacrificing for.

Jesus did it.

Will you?

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is it harder to reach people for Christ these days? In what ways is it easier?
2. Can you share your testimony in less than two minutes using the following script?

My life before Jesus was:

This is how I met Him:

My life now is:

Roger Hernández

3. The author states that being Adventist makes your life better and makes you better at life. What are your thoughts about that statement? Agree? Disagree? Partially agree or disagree? Why?
4. In what ways do you see confusion in the world today? Mention one example.
5. Mention the name of one person close to you who you wish would become a follower of Jesus. Write their name below.

Chapter

'Interesting. Tell Me More.'

The evangelistic outreach most of us were taught went something like this:

"You are wrong. I am right. Please sit down so I can tell you all the ways you are wrong."

That style definitely had more success in the past but doesn't work well anymore. Let me tell you why.

Every strategy has presuppositions. That old approach assumes some things about others that are misguided at best and dangerous at worst. It seldom works, but we take those few times it does work and highlight them as normative. Please stop.

What are the troubling assumptions?

- It assumes that people want religious information from you. It assumes that they can't get that information by themselves using a friend called Google and look up the answers to whatever questions they have.

- It assumes that people are more interested in the truth than in what works.
- It assumes that people are even at all interested in what happens after death or are even thinking regularly about religion.

As a result of faulty assumptions, we have seen less engagement and more alienation, mostly because we have come across as know-it-alls. And nobody (*me included*) likes a know-it-all. When we respond with pat statements to complicated life questions, it is no surprise that people have fallen for the new atheist movement that ridicules the caricature of Christians who can't think and celebrates non-Christians who won't believe.

Considering that reality, how are we to approach people in this post-pandemic world?

I love the Michael Stainer phrase, which gives us a useful skill as we look to witness effectively:

Stay curious longer.

It's a principle that works in all relationships. It is especially helpful with people to whom you are trying to share the good news. Pushy Christians make the good news seem like terrible advice.

Stay curious longer.

Here are some principles to follow as we seek to connect with people who are far from God.

- 1. Asking questions demonstrates humility.** Humility is both rare and necessary. Advice is beneficial, but humility is essential. Our natural inclination is to give advice too quickly.

You understand this concept if you are a parent. The temptation to go straight into advice mode is strong. It comes

'Interesting. Tell Me More.'

from a place of concern and love because we usually know how the story ends if the present decisions are left unchecked. The problem is that unbelievers aren't our children, and we usually repel more than attract when we give unsolicited advice to people.

When we are curious, it moves us closer to the person, not further away. Think about it. How could we give advice so quickly anyways? We haven't heard the full story!

In an era of historic lows of confidence in the church, isn't it better that we lead with curiosity rather than coming across as pushy or judgmental? According to Lifeway Research, *"Currently, only 31 percent of Americans say they have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the church or organized religion, with just 14 percent expressing a great deal of confidence. Almost 2 in 5 Americans (37 percent) say they have some confidence in the church, while 29 percent say they have very little"* (Aaron Earls, "Pastors and Churches Face Historic Lack of Trust," <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/07/12/pastors-and-churches-face-historic-lack-of-trust/>). Asking questions does not diminish or destroy your confidence in the message you seek to share. Rather, it demonstrates sincere interest and curiosity in other people's life experiences. Once again, on a basic level, how will we even know what advice to give if we only have superficial information?

- 2. Jesus asked questions. So should you!** Would it surprise you to know that Jesus asks 307 questions and answers only three, as recorded in the New Testament? Please don't skip over this point too quickly. The main takeaway is that the One who knew the heart of the people, the One who could shut down debate, the One who could give absolutely awesome advice, chose instead to ask questions most of the time. There is power in asking questions. Ken Downer puts

it this way: *“In the rush to answer questions, we risk missing the opportunity to ask them. And in doing so, we may miss a chance to learn. But beyond that, we risk losing an opportunity to lead”* (*“The Power of Asking Questions,”* <https://www.rapidstartleadership.com/asking-questions/>).

In life, it is always a fantastic idea to follow Jesus’ example. Find out what Jesus did, and do that. That’s the goal. Asking questions is a great way to get there.

- 3. Sharing without a relationship can be perceived as controlling.** You can have connection, or you can have control, but it’s hard to have both. When we lead with advice, it may solidify in the other person’s mind the stereotype that Christians are judgmental and don’t listen well.

Here is a good principle to follow: the more superficial the relationship, the fewer the words of advice on your behalf.

At this point you may be saying, *“Well, pastor, when do I get to share the gospel with people?”* We are coming to it; be patient. First, do me a favor. Ask yourself why our most natural and rapid response when we talk to people who are far from God is to give unsolicited advice. I have heard some well-meaning Christians push back on this, saying that the first priority is to just share, and after we share, we have completed our task. I would say that is partly true. It matters that we share. Every single individual is born into the kingdom of God as an evangelist. It also matters how we share and when we share. Keep those three principles in mind.

- 4. Don’t rush into answering, but be ready to answer.** One of my go-to texts when I think about sharing Christ is 1 Peter 3:15, which reads, *“Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a be-*

'Interesting. Tell Me More.'

liever, always be ready to explain it."

So much to unpack in that short passage. First, as we have been sharing in this chapter, it presents the believer as a person who is so connected with God that it will elicit questions in other people. Your life by itself should be convictional even before you say a word about your faith to anyone. Eventually, a question will be asked, and that's your opportunity. Talk about the hope you have. Talk about the difference Jesus has made in you. Shining the light is enough. It does not need added enhancement by cursing the darkness. Hope wins. If Adventism has made your life better and made you better at life, present specific examples of the blessing it has been, the trials it has gotten you through, and the hope that you live with every day. And hope does make a difference.

Allow me to illustrate it this way. Imagine two women who work in a cabinet-making factory. Their work every day is tedious and monotonous. They sand cabinet doors for eight hours a day for minimum pay. They hate their jobs. Monday morning is almost a curse word. Then one day, something amazing happens. The boss calls one of them and tells her that on December 31, she will receive a \$10 million bonus. The conversation takes place in May. All she needs to do is work until December.

What kind of impact do you think that conversation will have on her work ethic? On her demeanor? She might start coming to work earlier. She now whistles while she works. She laughs more and brings lunch to share with her co-workers. What changed? The conditions are the same, and she does the same work. What's different?

Hope.

Too often our evangelistic efforts have focused on the bad

that's happening in the world at the exclusion of the good. We should not delete the former as part of our message, but it's a matter of emphasis. Since we know that fear is the devil's preferred method, we don't draw people to Jesus using the devil's strategy! Hope draws them there. Eventually, it will be your time to share. When that time comes, share hope.

5. Use these two useful statements, and wait until they ask questions. Let me get very practical at this point. I have learned two statements that have been very helpful in connecting with people who have a different perspective or worldview. They are:

- *“Interesting.”*
- *“Tell me more.”*

Here is how to use them. One of my children, when they were sixteen years old, shared with me their goal for the year after high school graduation. They wanted to ride around in the wagons of freight trains and travel the United States. My first thought was, *“That’s a crazy idea.”* I am well acquainted with bad ideas, because I had them when I was younger myself, and I hear crazy ideas every day since I am a pastor. But instead of going into advice mode, I said,

- *“Interesting.”* Followed by . . .
- *“Tell me more.”*

We spoke for a while, and I left the conversation unfinished, which is not in my nature. A couple of weeks later, the same child came to me and said, *“Remember what we were talking about? I decided I am going to do something else.”* To which I said,

'Interesting. Tell Me More.'

- “Interesting.” Followed by . . .
- “Tell me more.”

I have used the same two questions when talking with a young adult who was trying to convince me that growing weed and selling it for medicinal purposes was an acceptable decision since weed is “*from the earth.*”

- “Interesting.” Followed by . . .
- “Tell me more.”

After listening for a while, he asked me the key question: “*What do you think?*” At that moment I had the chance to share my perspective with that young adult. It was a more productive conversation for sure.

Use questions. Dig deeper. Find out more, and when you think you have heard enough, ask even more questions. Genuine interest in someone else’s worldview will open more doors than you will even know, both for now and for eternity.

- 6. Be OK with conversations that end without a clear resolution.** Evangelism takes time because relationships aren’t forged in one day but in a daily investment of emotional resources. You might feel uncomfortable having conversations that don’t end in a resolution. You might feel you haven’t done your job. Just understand that everyone you talk to is on a journey. God has already been working with people before you showed up. In case you didn’t know, God doesn’t show up only when you do. We are a link in the chain of salvation. At times, the conversation needs to be processed in private, and God will lead that person toward His truth. I know some might be thinking, “*What if that’s their last night on earth?*” It’s possible but not probable.

Here's my suggestion. Pray that God may help you differentiate between when you need to ask for a decision and when you need to let the person process the ask you have made and restart the conversation the next day. I often follow that pattern when I am doing evangelism. When I have a conversation with someone who is in the valley of decision, I invite them to make a decision, but if I sense resistance, I let Scripture and the Spirit do the heavy lifting. I ask them to go home and promise me they will pray about their decision, and that whatever God leads them to do, they will follow. I can't remember many examples, if any, of people who went home and returned with a "no" answer. As someone has said, if we let people off the hook, usually they lean in.

If we just reminded ourselves often that God wants to change that person more than we do, that He loves that person more deeply than we ever could, and that He already did for that person what we could never do, which is to die for them, it will help us get out of advice mode and bring out the gospel. Because the gospel is more than good advice, its good news!

Discussion Questions

1. Is it hard or easy for you to go into advice mode?
2. What are some good questions you can ask someone who is far from God that aren't judgmental but will make them think?
3. According to this chapter, questions reveal humility. In what ways have you been prideful in your sharing of Christ?
4. Why is our personal testimony so important when we are sharing Christ? How can you share it without having people feel that your experience should be theirs?
5. How comfortable are you leaving conversations unfinished? Why do you feel this way?

Chapter

Pop

*M*y wife speaks love when I give her hugs, except for when she is cleaning or exercising. She says to me, “*Roger, when I am cleaning, I need more help and less hugs.*” She doesn’t like to be hugged while sweaty. Being a loving husband, I respect her wishes but stay close by.

One day she was doing P90X, which is a very strenuous exercise routine. If you have ever done P90X I know something about you. You have been injured. Which is what happened to her. She was doing scissor kicks when I heard the pop. She landed on her ankle the wrong way, fell to the floor, and became pale and started to have cold sweats.

Guess what I did? I was close by, so I dropped to the ground and hugged her.

Something strange happened. She didn’t chastise me for hugging her. She didn’t rebuke or reject my comfort. I helped her up, took her to get medical care, and pushed her wheelchair for two weeks while she rehabbed.

What does that story have to do with personal evangelism?

Here is the takeaway.

Stay close to people until you hear a pop.

When my wife requested no hugs while working out, I could have overwhelmed her with data which clearly demonstrates that hugs are beneficial to humans. I could have acted upset until she relented. I could have argued with her. None of those would have been helpful. I stayed close until I heard a pop. Then I became useful.

Eventually, most people will experience a pop.

A child in jail.

A broken relationship.

A financial crisis.

A health scare.

When people who are far from God begin to experience life's pops and are searching for answers and support, who will be so close to them that the logical choice is to reach out to them first?

You may feel as though the people in your life are all resistant to gospel conversations, but the exact opposite is true, with a caveat. According to a survey by Lifeway Research, *"The unchurched say they're open to having religious conversations. Close to half of unchurched Americans (47 percent) say they would discuss freely if someone wanted to talk about their religious beliefs. Another 31 percent would listen without actively participating. Few say they would discuss with some discomfort (12 percent) or change the subject as soon as possible (11 percent) (Aaron Earls, "Christians Don't Share Faith With Unchurched Friends," <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/09/09/christians-dont-share-faith-with-unchurched-friends/>).*

Pop

Research has also shown that people are often open to having conversations about faith with people they know. Don't miss that part. The old axiom is true. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Let's get even more specific about the pops we are hearing in our culture. While the older generation struggled with sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, this generation is experiencing another dangerous three-headed beast.

Anxiety.

Depression.

Suicidal ideation.

This is especially significant in younger people. The statistics tell a troubling story. U.S. government data tells us that *“young adults in the United States continue to be more likely than their older counterparts to be experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression, according to the latest federal data analyzed by KFF researchers. The analysis of the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey finds that half (50 percent) of adults ages 18-24 reported anxiety and depression symptoms in 2023, compared to about a third of adults overall. The data also show that young adults are more likely than adults of any other age group to experience mental health symptoms”* (Nirmita Panchal et al., *“The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use,”* <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/press-release/latest-federal-data-show-that-young-people-are-more-likely-than-older-adults-to-be-experiencing-symptoms-of-anxiety-or-depression/>).

This should be our main goal as Christians: when someone is struggling with their mental health, we are available as the first option to provide support during the hard times.

How do we get close to people so that when the pop happens,

you are the first option and not the last resort? Here are five ways that can happen for you. Since the goal for every Christian is to be other-centered, try these:

- 1. Cuisine.** Everyone eats. Why not be strategic about your meals so you include in them people who need companionship, support, and love? Some have said that Jesus ate His way through the gospel. Just take a cursory look at the first four books of the New Testament and you see Jesus eating. A lot.

Here are some examples:

- Ate with two disciples who were disappointed. *“And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish”* (Luke 24:40–43, NASB1995).
- Ate with questionable characters who had alternative lifestyles. *“And it happened that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him”* (Mark 2:15, NASB1995).
- Ate with people whose theology He disagreed with. *“Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table”* (Luke 7:36, NASB1995).
- Ate with a family and didn’t leave when questionable characters showed up. *“Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples”* (Matthew 9:10, NASB1995).

- Ate and prepared food for discouraged friends. “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ None of the disciples ventured to question Him, ‘Who are You?’ knowing that it was the Lord” (John 21:12, NASB1995).
- Ate with good friends in a private dinner. “So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him” (John 12:2, NASB1995).

These are just some of the examples of Jesus being intentional about His meals, whether people followed Him or not. He didn’t create meal moments to trap people; He just ate with people and let the conversations flow naturally.

2. **Celebration.** Everyone has special days, holidays and other occasions that are significant in the calendar year. If you ask questions (*see first section of this book*) you will realize what those are. Remembering a birthdate, anniversary, graduation, wedding, sports event, funeral, makes an impact. Others may include baby showers or a promotion at work. All of these precipitate a closer relationship, not a more superficial one. The key is to care about other people’s special moments. When we act generously toward our fellow humans we will stand out.

Right now, as I write this, I am staying in a house rental in Albany, Georgia. One interesting thing I realized about this neighborhood is that I never see anyone outside, no one is sharing life with their neighbors. Maybe your neighborhood isn’t like this, but what a sad way to live!

3. **Carefully listen.** Everyone has a story. Take time to ask people about theirs. Seek to understand. Appreciate nuance. We aren’t just listening to further our personal agenda, but

to be able to discern where the Spirit wants to heal, bless, transform, and empower.

- 4. Commit to serve.** “How can I serve you?” That should be your daily question. When you listen to the other person’s stories, you will discover their needs. We will address this more fully in another chapter, but if you wake up every day open to divine appointments, living an other-centered life, you will find multiple ways to serve. From pulling the neighbor’s trash can back from the curb to watching their dog, to sharing some cookies and inviting them to your cookout, there are multiple ways to serve every day. We don’t stop our life to serve; we serve as we live our life for Jesus.
- 5. Come out and play.** True religion doesn’t rob us of the joy of living. How can you play with your friends? Beach days, sports, picnics, dining out in the city, or shopping. People connect more when they play and laugh together.

HEAL

Some ways we can get closer to our community are based on the acronym HEAL.

- 1. Hear the voice of God.** Be silent for a moment. Do you hear that sound? It’s Gods heart breaking for His kids. What breaks the heart of God must break ours. What has God been speaking to you about? What kind of ministry has He been calling you to? What scriptures will pop into your mind regularly? What is moving your heart lately? Every engagement with other beings is an engagement with Him. Before you speak about God to other people, speak to God about others, and better yet, listen to God about others.
- 2. Engage the person, not the stereotype.** People are all different. When we engage a person, we can connect more deeply, and the relationship can blossom. The reason we

love labels is that when we use labels, we don't have to do the hard work of getting to know a person. Take for example a person who says they don't attend church. They might be taking a break from church but have no ill will toward it. Another person might not be attending because they are taking care of an elderly parent. Someone else won't come because of drama, and yet another might have experienced church discipline because of divisiveness and disruptive behavior. When we get to know the person, we will know better how to relate to them and hopefully help them.

3. **Admit where we've failed.** Church hurt is real. I have found that a simple *"I am sorry"* is appreciated by people who have experienced trauma because of negative religious experiences. It is not my job to be a constant apologist and dismiss or minimize the real pain they have gone through. Why is it so hard to say I am sorry?
4. **Love people more than policy, programs, pews, or the past.** Before you come with the torches for me for suggesting that policy takes second place to people, here is what I mean. I was pastor of a church where they didn't charge a fee for members who wanted to get married in the church but charged non-members a fee as a fundraiser. While I completely agree that some clear guidelines need to be in place for the usage, it sends a better signal to the community when we don't try to squeeze every penny out of them when they want to use our facilities. While we are here on this topic, I might as well state that nostalgia is not a church growth strategy. We value the past, but we don't worship it.

My wife has recovered from the ankle pop. Some time has passed since that fateful afternoon in Huntsville, Alabama. I have noticed a strange phenomenon. She doesn't make a big deal of me hugging her when she is sweating anymore.

As for the hugging while cleaning part, she nips that in the bud immediately. I have learned to pick up a broom and help her.

All around you, pops are going off.

What will you do about it?

Discussion Questions

1. Did it surprise you to recall all the times that Jesus ate with people? How can you incorporate that principle into your life?
2. What are you doing to address the three-headed monster of anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation in those closest to you?
3. When is it appropriate to say “*I am sorry*” when someone shares their church hurt? When is it appropriate to push back gently?
4. Mention three problems with basing your judgement on stereotypes and not getting to know the person.
5. How can we create policies that value individuals while retaining biblical values?

Chapter

Game Changer

A common question people ask me when I give seminars about merging service and evangelism is, How long do we serve before we talk to people about Jesus? That's a great question, and I'll give you the answer shortly. For now, let's focus on four ways Christians sometimes combine evangelism and community action:

"A religion that leads men to place a low estimate upon human beings, whom Christ has esteemed of such value as to give Himself for them; a religion that would lead us to be careless of human needs, sufferings, or rights, is a spurious religion. In slighting the claims of the poor, the suffering, and the sinful, we are proving ourselves traitors to Christ. It is because men take upon themselves the name of Christ, while in life they deny His character, that Christianity has so little power in the world. The name of the Lord is blasphemed because of these things."—

Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings*, 136

1. **Bait.** Service is given not because we want to bless people, but we make it a requirement that they share their personal information so we can visit them later, unannounced, to offer them Bible studies even if they have expressed no spiritual interest. This strategy doesn't work well, as people realize they're being used, so they hide and don't return.

2. **By force.** It's similar to number 1, but service is provided with the condition that they attend a religious experience. For example, if you want the food box, you must attend the worship service.
3. **Ignoring.** Service is given, and even if the person asks for religious information, they're told, "*We're not here to talk about religion, we only serve food here.*" This is not helpful. I mean, how much would you have to hate someone to believe their lives can be transformed both here and in eternity and not answer spiritual questions? While we must be judicious and prudent when addressing spiritual topics, we shouldn't mute the witness because we believe service and evangelism are incompatible.
4. **Natural.** The best way is the natural way. It's the opposite of forced religion; it begins with a relationship with you, and it ends with a relationship between them and God. It follows three basic principles: selfless service; openness to divine opportunities; readiness to provide an answer.

Evangelism through the Past Two Centuries

If you are like me, you are interested in evangelistic approaches that work. So, if some of the approaches mentioned above don't work very well, what does work? Glad you asked.

Scholars studying patterns and trends among non-churchgoers (*the "nones"*) have shared some best practices in connecting with unbelievers. Notice how strategies have changed over the past 150 years.

Pay attention to the following three words: Christ. Community. Cause.

- **Christ:** public event, program, or situation where Christ is presented for a decision to be made

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- **Community:** think of small groups, connections, meals, and friendship
- **Cause:** service to the community, involvement in meeting needs.

The following are not hard and fast dates, just approximate eras, but understanding the different ways we reach people should be helpful for our discussion.

Founders Era: 1850–1980

Primary method: Centralized, decision-making events, mostly through public evangelism.

Target: Nominal Christian, because a larger percentage of the population claimed belief in God. Another target was an unchurched person who didn't go to church but went to school where they prayed and lived under an umbrella of Christian ethics even if they didn't acknowledge it.

Evangelistic strategy (in order, mostly):

Christ: begins with Bible studies and religious surveys, invited to a series of evangelistic sermons at a hall, tent or church.

Community: the person becomes part of the Christian community and joins the Adventist church. Many churches are planted as a result of an evangelistic series.

Cause: the new believer gets involved in their local church after their baptism and starts working for causes and needs the church is involved in.

Personal Era: 1980–2000

More emphasis on personal, friendship-based evangelism, small groups gain traction.

The target is still a nominal Christian or unchurched person who claims belief in God but is not committed to any religion.

The strategy begins to shift. Notice the order:

Community: the person becomes part of a small group community or finds that their friendship with a believer is helpful or rewarding. Bible studies are in the home and then we invite them to church.

Christ: the decision happens in the church or venue. Public evangelism is still strong but not as prevalent. Some new methods are tried, like satellite evangelism.

Cause: the new believer gets involved in church after their baptism and starts working for causes and needs the church is involved in.

The target is still the nominal Christian and an unchurched person. The umbrella of Christian ethics is beginning to disappear, and in the general culture, a mix of politics and religion becomes stronger (*that really started in the 1980s and 1990s*). North America begins to experience the rise of the megachurch, and it's seen as a model of church growth.

Present Era: 2001–Today

The target expands to include not only unchurched, nominal Christians but also “*nones*” and people from other religions as Western civilization becomes more multicultural. There is more emphasis on compassion and service evangelism.

So what are we saying? Churches that mainly reach unchurched and nominal Christians follow step 2 of this process. Churches that reach “*nones*” follow the pattern outlined below.

Cause: the church engages in community work for a longer

period. No drive-by compassion. They engage in what I call the Five H's of ministry: health, homelessness, human trafficking, hunger, and history.

Community: the person becomes part of a small group community, finds friendship, and wants to belong before believing. Many start volunteering before becoming a member of the church.

Christ: the relationship begins on a personal level, but the decision to follow Jesus completely and become a member of the local Adventist church can happen in many different ways, especially after the pandemic. They can join a local church, commit online, in a small group, or a house church.

One more point before we move on: the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the last era. We are just starting to see the lasting effects on church growth. The next chapter will address the specific COVID-19 impact, but now let's move on to some best practices.

Five Points of Connection

If we agree that a key to reaching the “*nones*” is time and connection, let me share with you five ways to connect with them. Although we spoke about these in previous chapters, it's a good time for a reminder.

- 1. Share Meals.** Everyone eats. Why not dedicate a weekly meal to connect with someone you want to see in heaven? People who eat together connect on another level. Strategic meals are wonderful.
- 2. Listen.** Everyone has a story. Take time to ask the people you want to lead to Jesus about theirs. Seek to listen rather than talk. Evangelism isn't just about us talking; it's more about listening. Jesus always asked questions.

3. **Serve.** How can I serve you? That should be your daily question. When you listen to their stories, you'll discover their needs.
4. **Celebrate.** Everyone has special moments to celebrate. Seize those moments to be present. Birthdays, weddings, baby showers, graduations, funerals, children's games, work promotions.
5. **Play.** True religion doesn't rob us of the joy of living. How can you play with your friends? Beach days, sports, picnics, dining out, shopping. People connect more when they play and laugh together. (*Adapted from the book Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* [Crossway, 2015], by Jeff Vanderstelt.)

While it's true that our work isn't solely combating social ills at the expense of the gospel, we have a responsibility that goes beyond helping people to get to heaven. Ellen White eloquently explains this point:

A religion that leads men to place a low estimate upon human beings, whom Christ has esteemed of such value as to give Himself for them; a religion that would lead us to be careless of human needs, sufferings, or rights, is a spurious religion. In slighting the claims of the poor, the suffering, and the sinful, we are proving ourselves traitors to Christ. It is because men take upon themselves the name of Christ, while in life they deny His character, that Christianity has so little power in the world. The name of the Lord is blasphemed because of these things (*Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings*, 136).

Based on this quote, we understand that there are three levels of community service.

- **Level 1 — Charity:** immediate, emergency help

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- **Level 2 — Certification:** think about classes, education, and information; training availability for the development of skills
- **Level 3 — Change:** a systemic change that gives access to resources, jobs, education, and housing that improves the quality of life

Here are some examples:

Example 1

Level 1: Give a man a fish.

Level 2: Teach a man to fish.

Level 3: Change the systems so that the man has access to his own fishing lake.

Example 2

Level 1: Food bank.

Level 2: Computer classes.

Level 3: Assistance in purchasing own home.

I've noticed that churches often focus on the first level of service, sometimes the second, but not the third. Take for example, human trafficking. We can help victims with immediate shelter and food. But we also need to provide job training or retraining and, most important, work with lawmakers to allocate resources to assist anti-trafficking task forces.

If we concentrate on the symptoms and not the root cause, we will always be filling a bucket with holes in it. How many in your church have sat down with decision-makers at the third level? I fear that if we don't collaborate to influence the systems that do more harm than good, we will continue the vicious cycle of dys-

function without a solution for many who urgently need it.

That's why you need both spirituality and service. Becoming mute and removing the option of sharing the good news from community service changes circumstances but not hearts. At the same time, if you stick to preaching and ignore the problems of your community, and don't address needs on all three levels, you'll have people who are religiously educated with empty stomachs. It's not one or the other; it's both.

But, is it biblical?

Sometimes I hear people expressing that our role is to preach the gospel, not transform communities. Our foundation for addressing the above topic should always be the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. So, let's look at some Bible references that support a church-oriented approach toward community needs. We need to look no further than Jesus himself.

Jesus said, *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45, ESV).

Acts 10:38: *"How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him"* (NIV).

Jesus didn't shut up and preach. He served, He healed, He loved. So should we.

Remember that there are 37 recorded miracles of Jesus in the New Testament. There's only one full recorded sermon of Jesus: the Sermon on the Mount.

Consider this passage: *Romans 2:4 says, "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?"*

Reflect on the implications of this passage:

- God’s kindness leads you to repentance.
- God’s kindness is expressed through our acts of service.
- When that kindness is expressed, others praise the Lord (*2 Corinthians 9:13*).

From these passages, we can conclude that earthly kindness can have an eternal impact. When we serve, we’re meeting others’ needs and helping them to know God.

Let me close this chapter with a personal invitation. Service can be done with many or few. Instead of waiting for your church to start serving, you do something!

There are three important principles as you begin to get closer to people through service.

- 1. Service broadens your impact.** When you serve, you impact three groups of people in a positive way—the one who serves, the ones you serve, and the ones you serve with. This is especially important for the younger generation, who love to see the church engaging the community in practical ways.
- 2. Service honors God, blesses people, and changes perceptions.** Servant evangelism softens the hearts of persons who are not yet Christians—people who often think the church exists only for itself or that it only wants people’s time and money. By doing a “*low-risk*” activity that shows “*high grace*,” those resistant to the faith may (*now or in the future*) become more open to the saving message of Jesus Christ.” Please stay consistent with the “*service with no strings attached*” principle, and at the same time look for opportunities to share Jesus with the people you are serv-

ing. Don't pressure people, but be aware of "God moments" you can use to share your faith.

3. **Service is more than an event.** It is not something you do once in a while, to placate the conscience, appease the leadership, or satisfy a requirement. In order to make this a priority, be an advocate at your local church so that they
 - schedule it
 - fund it
 - model it
 - speak about it

Here is the answer to the question we asked at the beginning of the chapter: How long do we serve them? We serve them until they ask, "Why?"

Discussion Questions

1. How can we change our mindset from "*stopping my life to serve*" to "*serving as I live my life*"? What changes would I have to make to see that happen?
2. How comfortable are you involving guests in service in the local church? Are there any positions that would be off-limits?
3. Where is the balance between not using service as bait and at the same time being open to sharing with the people we serve about the good news of the gospel?
4. Think about one way you can get involved in your local church service initiatives in your community.
5. After reading about the approach to reach "*nones*," what new strategies can be implemented in your local church to be more effective in reaching this demographic?

Chapter

Missing the Mark

A bright young adult was having a spirited conversation with his pastor. The topic of the sermons came up, and the pastor posed a risky question: *“How is my preaching?”*

The young man replied, *“Think of the Grand Canyon for a moment. On one side is what we are going through, our real life. On the other side is what you are preaching about.”*

Ouch.

He was missing the mark.

I have never forgotten that conversation because it resonates with multiple discussions I have been privy to as a church leader. What that young adult said might be difficult to hear, but it doesn't make it any less true. Many times we are answering questions no one is asking and having theological discussions today about issues that were a problem yesterday.

As we get personal with sharing the gospel with people around us, we need to understand that there are three at-risk populations

that churches and Christians are struggling to connect with, both in corporate worship services and in the other 165 hours we spend outside church. They are children, youth, and unbelievers.

Children

In most churches I visit, the worship service is structured to reach adults. The length, order, topics, and formality all point to one message: this is for grown-ups. Once in a while we have a Pathfinder or Adventurer Sabbath, and some churches will have a children's story every week, although it is the first thing we cut if the service goes long. Kids do not decide to attend church, they were brought by adults, so they will make a decision at some point to remain or leave. You and I can make a difference for good.

It's hard to train children as disciples when worship at home is ignored and at church they are ignored. If the only message they get from adults both at home and in the church is that cartoons are evil and how Tommy should have listened to his mommy instead of riding his bike when he was told not to, we are missing the mark. If we fail the discipleship of our children, culture is putting billions into filling that gap.

Think about this for a moment. When was the last time you heard a grace-drenched children's story at church? I'll wait.

Youth and Young adults

We said before that this generation has an increasing disconnection from religious institutions. According to the Barna Group, the number of "nones" in Gen Z outnumber the Christians for the first time. All is not lost, however, as one article correctly states: *"In this time of rising depression and suicidal despair, it seems many in Generation Z reached this point, with a new study showing a rising share of young adults have religious faith. About one-third of 18- to 25-year-olds say they believe in the existence of God or a higher power. This is up from about one-quarter in 2021, noted The Wall*

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Street Journal's Clare Ansberry, writing on polling data from the Springtide Research Institute" (Carrie Sheffield, "Why Generation Z is Returning to God," <https://nypost.com/2023/04/26/why-generation-z-is-returning-to-religion/>).

Any Christian who is worried about reaching this generation needs to hold these two truths in tension:

(1) we haven't been doing that well in reaching young people, and yet I am hopeful change is starting to happen in an increasing number of churches; and

(2), we have reason to be optimistic, so please don't give up trying.

One way we can be a source of blessing to this generation is to understand that they are struggling with the three-headed monster probably more than any previous generation: depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Please don't ignore these issues. It can not only cost them their health, it can also cost them their life.

Unbelievers

People who don't believe as we do, or don't believe at all, are not projects to be completed, tasks to be checked off, or trophies we get to show off. They are people created in the image of God, with whom we get to share the good news of the gospel. We do the telling and let the Holy Spirit take care of the transformation. They already attend your church, because, in the course of a year, you will have the same number of guests in your church as you do in a regular Sabbath. That's why every Sabbath is an opportunity! Add to that the countless interactions that you and I have every day with people in need of hope and you can see the possibilities.

Here are some practical suggestions as we interact with people who are far from God.

1. Let the Bible do the heavy lifting. Instead of constantly

drumming on where they are falling short, share a scripture that will meet needs first (*although not exclusively*). A person who starts seeing the value in the change they are experiencing themselves in areas like family, relationships, finances, or mental health will soon be drawn to ask what other areas God wants them to change, improve, or discard. Less saliva and more scripture.

2. **Smile.** The perception out there is that Christians are like Flanders from *The Simpsons*, who never enjoys life, is uptight, and frowns on anything fun. Be different. Learn to laugh. Develop a sense of humor; it breaks down barriers since its been proven than laughing together bonds people quicker than practically anything else.
3. **Serve.** “*How can I help you*” always precedes “*I would love to tell you.*” We dedicated a whole chapter to this, so I won’t belabor the point, but it is awesome to wake up every day on a mission to add value to the people around you. Be interested vs. interesting. Make it about other people, not yourself.
4. **Tell Stories.** It’s harder to argue with a story than a statement, yet stories are statements with interesting clothes on. Stories are facts with soul. They are sticky, and they help the other person look for places that they can relate to. Tell as many stories as you can. Jesus did.

One Last Thing

At a personal and ecclesiastical level, you can make small changes that result in a significant impact. I invite you to think about four areas for connecting with children, youth, and unbelievers/non-church people. First, let’s define the terms and then apply them to each of the three groups.

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In every church gathering as well as your personal life, you will fall into one or more of these four categories:

- 1. Antagonistic.** In “*us vs. them,*” most references are negative in nature, we ignore any contributions, and focus on the problems. For example, when speaking about youth, the illustrations are about how entitled this generation is, without mentioning any achievements or contributions they have made to the world.
- 2. Ignored.** Imagine how heaven must feel to know that the Spirit brought a spiritually curious individual to your church and you ignored them. For example, it never crosses our mind that saying the phrase “*this is a familiar story from the Bible*” assumes everyone listening has heard it before, which is not the case. We usually ignore what we don’t understand. It’s not something we think about. Another good example is that on a personal level, we know there are human trafficking victims in our country, none we know of personally, so it does not affect our day-to-day living.
- 3. Passing reference.** One mention here or there, one special Sabbath or event or greeting, not much else. The relationship can be described as casual. For example, a five-minute children’s story in a 90-minute worship service where everything else is adult related, including the stories, sermon content, length, and music style is exactly what I am talking about when I say passing reference.
- 4. Engaged.** This is the goal. It’s intentional about sustained connection. In corporate worship and in personal interaction, the three aforementioned groups are a focal point. We pay attention to them, not exclusively but very purposefully. We make the three groups an integral part of what we do in church, not just a passing reference or an inconvenience.

Now let's take these one at a time, with specific examples of each. Read each with care, and place your congregation in the category where it belongs.

Children

Antagonistic. How are we antagonistic to the youngest ones? Here are some examples. Children who cry during church are given dirty looks. We criticize any child running in church, telling them God doesn't like it when they run in the sanctuary. Even the children's story is rich in moralism but lacking in grace, and in all the illustrations in said stories the children end up breaking a rule and paying for it dearly.

Ignored. This is better than the alternative but not by much. In this approach there is no children's story, it's all sermon content, and worship service is adult-centric. The children are told they will be the church of tomorrow even though they are in church that day, which is at best confusing and at worst an unbiblical lie.

Passing reference. Some improvement, but still not optimal. There is a children's story, but that is where most of the engagement ends. They may hear once in a while a story they can relate to, but not much else. The message we are sending is this: we know you are here, but this isn't for you. This is particularly atrocious with the online audience, where more often than not, kids get zero interaction. There are some days during the year when we profile kids, for example, on children's Sabbath or Pathfinder and Adventurer Day, or we may ask occasionally for a child to lead out in a prayer or lead a song. The operating phrase is "*once in a while.*"

Engaged. This is the ideal. The worship service is designed to be multigenerational. Songs, program length, topics, and participants reflect the different ages and perspectives of the people in the congregation. The children's story is a happy, helpful time. Kids have a children's bulletin to follow the speaker, and illustrations

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in every message include issues and interests that kids can relate to. It's not the church of tomorrow, it's today's church.

Where would you rate your church or small group for how they treat children in these four categories? Mention one change you could make this week to make church more appealing to children.

Young People

Any person who uses the phrase “*young people*” is already old, so I get it, I am old.

Nevertheless, since my wife and I have four young people who we want to see in heaven, this point is essential to my efforts. There are some practical steps you can take to make sure we don't lose this generation. Your church is in one of the following categories.

Antagonistic. Every illustration or reference (*or most of them*) has to do with how entitled this generation is, how much they play video games, are vaping, their social media overuse. I want to be clear; every generation has idols that must be confronted, but if the negative aspects of the generation are the only thing that is presented you will lose their interest, or worse, you will lose them.

Ignored. In some congregations, similar to children, youth are ignored in leadership, worship services, and planning or decision making. In these churches the sermon content and worship service are both adult-centric. The stories, illustrations, or topics address people who are significantly older than them. Just like kids, the youth are told they will be the church of tomorrow even though they are in church that day. What we fail to realize is that what we ignore today will disappear tomorrow.

Passing reference. Partial engagement will lead to full disconnection, and that is not what you want, is it? Having a youth day or a separate youth service where they are neither seen or heard is not enough. They may hear an illustration occasionally that they

can relate to. Basically, what we are telling them is, “*We know you are here, but this isn’t primarily for you.*” This is particularly atrocious online. I find it interesting that the very youth who help you run the audiovisual department get very little interaction in the content of the program. There are some days during the year where we profile youth, such as, for example, on International Youth Day in the spring, or a special youth Sabbath. We may ask them occasionally to lead out in a prayer or a song that we like. The operating phrase is “*once in a while.*” This is better but not optimal.

Engaged. The worship service is designed to be multigenerational. Songs, program length, topics, and participants reflect the different ages and perspectives of the people in the congregation. The worship service is a happy, helpful time. Illustrations in every message include issues and interests that young people can relate to or be inspired by. It’s not the church of tomorrow, it’s today’s church. The message is composed of topics youth can immediately identify with. Phones are not condemned, they are redeemed, and the same with music, art, and social media. One specific dress code is not imposed. Leadership positions are available, and getting involved in the church’s decision-making process is encouraged and celebrated. Since you usually attract whoever you platform, church will be especially mindful to profile youth in every service.

Where would you rate your church or small group in these four categories? Mention one change you could make this week to make church more appealing to youth.

Unbelievers

The biblical mandate is that churches use the double-barrel approach: evangelize unbelievers and equip believers. This balanced approach will help grow the church in and out, deep and high. However, if we are honest, many times what happens on Sabbath

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is geared for the FUBU church: for us, by us. And then we wonder why it is just us in the church. Here are four categories that churches find themselves in when connecting with non-members.

Antagonistic. Notice how people refer to unbelievers in your church, especially during messages or the lesson study. Do you use expressions that are more pejorative than beneficial, such as “worldly,” “those people,” and “non-Adventists”? “Non-Adventist” in particular is unhelpful in so many ways, because it makes us sound like a club or a secret society and begins the conversation by exclusion. It’s an extra-biblical term. Demonizing outsiders doesn’t make insiders more holy. I think maybe some of us fear that speaking well of people who have no faith will make that option more appealing to church members. I just wonder what kind of flimsy, unattractive, and unhelpful faith would think that a positive comment about outsiders will destroy it.

Ignored. Everything that happens in a regular worship service happens “with them” in attendance but is clearly not “for them.” From the terminology to the length or topic selection we send a message: thanks for coming, let’s see if you can make heads or tails of what’s going on here today. Instead of referring to people and acknowledging that some may not yet believe what we are teaching because of where they are in their journey, we continue to talk to ourselves and about others. This does not work well.

Passing reference. This category of church gives a welcome from the front, and that’s pretty much it. Sometimes we have a potluck where we ask guests to eat first, only to encounter that Steve already served himself to all the tacos. Steve is a member and a deacon.

Here is an idea. Why not prioritize guests during the worship and not just at potluck? What would a guests-come-first approach look like? Interestingly, many of these types of churches consider themselves to be friendly, and that’s partially true; they are

friendly among themselves. New people need more than a passing reference. They need to belong if they are ever going to believe.

Engaged. To experience engagement, this is the ideal! I have attended some churches that live out this principle, and here is me hoping their tribe increases. What does an engaged church look like? They greet people at least three times before the service starts. They sit close to guests. They design a worship service that can be understood by them. They use illustrations that highlight their fears, hopes, questions, and real-life scenarios. It's a church that has members who are curious of their guests' experiences instead of assuming they are curious about ours; a church that admits when they don't know the answer instead of making it up as they go along. In this scenario, guests can see a clear path of discipleship that is both accessible and inviting. Ask yourself the following question: If you aren't going to engage people where they are, why would God bring them to you?

This chapter probably challenged you. That was the point. As we struggle with the reality of presenting the everlasting gospel to an unchanging world, keep the conversation going.

Don't miss the mark.

Discussion Questions

1. What is one specific, simple, permanent change you can make this weekend to address the three groups we spoke about in the chapter?
2. Which one of the three do you feel your church is best at? Worst?
3. Have you had conversations with the three groups to ask how to better engage with them? What did they say?
4. How can we distinguish the difference between mission

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(*unchangeable*) and method (*changeable and updatable*)? Give some examples of which is which. For example, which category would the following items fall under?

Time the service begins

Music in worship

Length of service

Participation in church offices such as greeter or food bank ministry by a non-member

5. When was the last time your church focused on the three-headed monster of suicide ideation, anxiety, and depression?



Chapter

Jesus at the Center

A while back, on a Saturday night, my daughter's boyfriend (now husband) and I were having a conversation. He was telling me about the morning's church service that he had attended. The pastor preached from the Old Testament. It was an interesting sermon, but something was missing. Jamil told me, *"If anyone had come to that church that morning without knowing Jesus, he or she would've left without knowing Jesus. There was nothing about Jesus in the sermon."*

Ouch.

Perhaps that preacher forgot this quote: *"There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone"* (Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works* [Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1979], 18, emphasis supplied).

Jesus at the Center

As we close this book, we need to make sure that as we share Jesus, we share Jesus. He is not an appetizer, an appendage, or an appendix. Jesus is not one of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs; He is at the center of every belief.

People on the extremes have taken Jesus out of His place. On one hand, some say that Jesus is not enough. So, they add secondary elements and elevate them to the same position as the Savior. On the other hand, the other side says that Jesus is not necessary. So they eliminate Him and make it about Moralistic Therapeutic Deistic Religion.

Both positions are wrong. You end up with a lot of talk and little of Jesus on both sides.

Here are some principles to remember when striving for a Christ-centered witnessing lifestyle.

1. Christ-centered witnessing assumes the Bible is a book about Jesus. The Old Testament announces Jesus to us, and the New Testament presents Jesus to us. You must be intentional in demonstrating the connection between Jesus and the passage you are sharing with a person who is not familiar with the truth of Scripture.

*“There need to be far more lessons in the ministry of the Word of true conversion than of the arguments of the doctrines. For it is far easier and more natural for the Spirit of Christ to choose doctrinal subjects rather than the practical. There are many Christless discourses given no more acceptable to God than was the offering of Cain. They are not in harmony with God” (Ellen G. White, *The Voice in Speech and Song* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1988], 342).*

The center of the Bible is not the heroes of the Bible; it is the Hero of the Bible—Jesus. All the other characters have lessons to teach us, but Jesus was the perfect version of David, Job, Moses, Esther, and all the others. Here are some examples adapted from a ser-

Roger Hernández

mon by Tim Keller:

“Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden . . . and whose obedience is imputed to us.

“Jesus is the true and better Abel, who, though innocently slain, has blood that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for our acquittal.

“Jesus is the true and better Abraham, who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go into the void, not knowing whither he went [to create a new people of God].

“Jesus is the true and better Isaac, who was not just offered up by his father on the mount, but was truly sacrificed for us all. What God said to Abraham, ‘Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son—your only son whom you love—from me,’ now we, at the foot of the cross, can say to God, ‘Now we know that you love me because you did not withhold your Son—your only Son whom you love—from me.’

“Jesus is the true and better Jacob, who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserve so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.

“Jesus is the true and better Joseph, who sits at the right hand of the king and forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his power to save them.

“Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people in the Lord and who mediates a New Covenant.

“Jesus is the true and better rock of Moses, who when struck with a rod of God’s justice, now gives us water in the desert.

“Jesus is the true and better Job, who became a truly innocent sufferer and now intercedes for and saves his stupid friends. . . .

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“Jesus is the true and better David, whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.

“Jesus is the true and better Esther, who didn’t just risk losing an earthly palace but lost the ultimate heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life but gave his life to save his people. . . .

“Jesus is the true and better Jonah, who was cast out into the storm so we could be brought in.”

Jesus is the real Rock of Moses, “*the real Passover Lamb,*” innocent, perfect, helpless, slain so the angel of death will pass over us. He’s “*the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, the true bread*” (adapted from Tim Keller, “What Is Gospel-Centered Ministry?,” May 28, 2007, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/gospel-centered-ministry/)

The Bible is really not about you—it’s about Him.

In Adventist theology, for example, our emphasis as we share the second coming of Jesus is the Jesus part, instead of devolving into a conspiracy-filled scare tactic that prioritizes Jesuits over Jesus. When we talk about the state of the dead, we help people to better understand the state of the One who lives forever and who has won over death. The Sabbath is about Jesus; the law sends us to Jesus; and baptism is a celebration of what Jesus has done, which I now make mine. The Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is glorious, helpful, and shareable when infused with Jesus.

2. Christ-centered witnessing is demonstrated by an emphasis on Jesus. First of all, Jesus’ style of witnessing is less sermonic and more embedded with the people. There are thirty-seven miracles and only two sermons recorded in the Bible. This is not to say that door-to-door sharing and teaching the Bible are not important, but the most effective witnessing is that of a transformed life,

which not only speaks to people far from God about their destiny but also does things for them to show them how much God loves them. We talk too much and do very little, but that's a conversation for another day. The message of the Bible is, "What Jesus did" always comes before "what would Jesus do."

It's all a matter of emphasis. Since we are all teaching from the same Bible, emphasis makes all the difference. Let's examine how Jesus preached by looking at two examples: the Sermon on the Mount and the sermon Jesus preached in Nazareth, His hometown.

Exhibit 1: The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3, NIV, emphasis supplied).

Note the emphasis. The first word is "blessed." Before talking about more difficult, hard, and painful things, He begins with the word blessed. If you take good notice, you see that Jesus uses the sandwich system:

(Bread) Blessed: something good

(Peanut butter) Poor in spirit: something hard

(Bread) Kingdom of God: something good

This is also known as a chiasmic structure. A chiasmic structure "is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a 'mirror' effect as the ideas are 'reflected' back in a passage. . . . The term chiasm comes from the Greek letter chi, which looks like our letter X" ("What Is a Chiasm?," [https:// www.gotquestions.org/chiasm-chiastic.html](https://www.gotquestions.org/chiasm-chiastic.html)).

Exhibit 2: The Sermon at the Synagogue. Let's read the passage in Luke:

When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to

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read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: *“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.”* He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently (Luke 4:16–20).

Notice where Jesus ends His sermon. He is preaching from the passage in Isaiah, but Isaiah ends it a little differently. See if you can tell the difference between Jesus’ words and the original:

**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me,
for the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the
brokenhearted
and to proclaim that captives will be released
and prisoners will be freed.
He has sent me to tell those who mourn
that the time of the LORD’s favor has come,
and with it, the day of God’s anger against their enemies (Isaiah
61:1, 2).**

The lesson here is simple. The gospel we share is always good news, not just good advice. Your friends and neighbors can get good advice from many people much better qualified than you. The good news can only be given by a person who has experienced the good news in his or her life. The good news is not centered on the fact that God takes a bad man and makes him good;

it is that God takes a dead man and makes him live.

Notice what the Pen of Inspiration tells us about Jesus' way of witnessing. This Jesus-centered approach works well today as well!

Jesus talked with . . .

- words that were full of “*tender, courteous grace*” (*White, Gospel Workers, 45*)
- words that were “*always patient and cheerful*” (*Gospel Workers, 43*)
- words that “*helped all who were in sorrow and affliction*” (*Gospel Workers, 45*)

The motivation for a person to change is not the fear of being lost but the love of the only one who can save: Jesus. This quote illustrates:

The shortness of time is frequently urged as an incentive for seeking righteousness and making Christ our friend. This should not be the great motive with us; for it savors of selfishness. Is it necessary that the terrors of the day of God should be held before us, that we may be compelled to right action through fear? It ought not to be so. Jesus is attractive. He is full of love, mercy, and compassion. He proposes to be our friend, to walk with us through all the rough pathways of life. He says to us, I am the Lord thy God; walk with Me, and I will fill thy path with light. Jesus, the Majesty of heaven, proposes to elevate to companionship with Himself those who come to Him with their burdens, their weaknesses, and their cares. He will count them as His children, and finally give them an inheritance of more value than the empires of kings, a crown of glory richer than has ever decked the brow of the most exalted earthly monarch. . . . It is our privilege to have daily a calm, close, happy walk with Jesus (*Ellen G. White, Lift Him Up [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1988], 98*).

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Remember this as we witness. No one is shamed into a conversion experience.

3. Christ-centered witnessing is the most Adventist thing you can do to people who aren't Adventists. Sometimes I meet people who say that Jesus is “milk” while prophecy is “solid food”; that Jesus is preached by other churches and that we are called to preach present truth. Ellen White seems to differ: “*Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world*” (Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1915], 156, emphasis supplied).

It is not Jesus or doctrine. It is Jesus in the doctrine. It is not either Jesus or prophecy. It is Jesus in the prophecy. Jesus is not one of our beliefs. Jesus is in all our beliefs. He's like the frame of a picture that has several photos in it.

4. Christ-centered witnessing is the vehicle of true transformation. If it's true that what makes your Adventism a viable option in this post-Christian world is a changed life, what is the best way to make that happen? Jesus at the center. Religious information without Jesus is counterproductive. Your job is not to change people. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. The Adventist member's job is not to bring them to God but to bring God to them, since He is the only one who can change people. When our main focus is our sins, there is little victory, because we become what we contemplate.

Let's use an illustration about exercise.

If you look in the mirror and you do not like what you see, you have two options: first, you focus on your obesity, scream, regret your condition, and neglect the exercises you could do to lose weight. As a second option, you persevere in exercising, see the long-term results, and achieve the desired goal, with the help of a friend who doesn't leave you on the days you eat a doughnut

instead of a kale shake.

When we minimize Jesus and maximize religious information, we are condemning people to experience information without power. Having information without power is like telling an out-of-shape person to run up Mount Everest. That person may know how to do it but cannot do it. Information without power causes three problems:

1. It's frustrating because there is little victory.
2. It's hurtful, because to feel better you hurt others who sin differently.
3. It's impossible because you are always running but never arriving.

People are in need of life-giving change. Only Jesus and His grace can do it. The problem is that grace is hard to find. Can they find grace in your city? They do not find grace in the following areas:

1. **Sport.** If you play well, you get paid. Endorsements, applause, fans always come to where the winner is. Sports are driven by performance.
2. **Work.** If you work well, you have bonuses, you get promotions, pay increases, a bigger office. In other words, your benefits depend on the work you do.
3. **School.** You try hard, you do well in your tests, and you're on the honor roll. Those who work hard receive scholarships, recognition (*summa cum laude*), and the paper that says you really deserve what you worked for. You depend on the work you do to succeed.

Our world is governed by production. From the supermarket to the information networks, the principle is the same. You get rewarded for what you do. Your value is in your production capacity.

Jesus at the Center

There is little inherent worth otherwise; at the moment you stop producing, it's over. It is impossible to buy a car, a house, or a computer by grace. If you want to shop at a mall, eat in a restaurant, or have a haircut, you have to pay for it. A credit card gives you a "*time of grace*" that does not really exist, because in the end you always have to pay. So, the core question is this: If we all fail, and grace is the best alternative in order to avoid failure, where can we find grace? Where can we enjoy an environment where we can experience liberation, transformation, and the grace that changes lives?

Grace can only be experienced in the context of a Jesus-filled life. I believe there is a place where this change and growth can be accelerated. That place is the church. The church is the place where grace must abound. It can bring hope to the world. It is the only place where you can find love for the sinner and help for the lost. It is the hospital where each patient can receive treatment and recover. It is the only place where you go as you are and come out better than you were. But people won't come to church if they don't see the church coming to them.

That's where you and I come in. By getting personal with people, we can be the hands and feet of Jesus, so that when they get to church, they can understand that it's in a healthy community that God uses the church to help His children and teach them the path of grace. The church is the place where God wants people to come, the place where we can reveal our problems and find solutions for them. It is the place where we experience grace and love.

"Love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened" (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898], 22).

What a gift and responsibility God has placed on you and me, to show that love to people.

I decided a while back to share Jesus wherever I go.

Will you join me?

Let's get serious. Let's get real. But above all, let's get personal!

Discussion Questions

- 1.** How can we make sure we keep Jesus at the center of every teaching and conversation?
- 2.** What is the best way to keep Jesus at the center of teaching on last-day events?
- 3.** When someone says that Jesus is not present truth, how do you respond?
- 4.** How do you respond to people who want to prioritize Jesus but eliminate doctrine?
- 5.** Who will you pray for, befriend, love, and share Jesus with this year? Write their names here.

Relational Bible Studies

How to use the lessons

1. Purpose

These lessons are intended to help you understand, deal with, and overcome life's hurts, hang-ups, and negative habits, and to bring you hope and healing.

2. The Lessons

Each lesson contains four parts, based on the acronym **H-O-P-E**:

Hear—We start with a relevant introductory thought, quote, story, or scripture. Read it carefully.

Open—This part focuses specifically on opening the Bible and gleaning what the Word of God has to say about that lesson's topic. Some of the questions are the fill-in-the-blank type. Feel free to write in, mark up, and underline key thoughts.

Practice—In this part of the lesson, you turn your knowledge about an issue into practical ideas on how to implement it in your life. The truth is, many of us are educated well above our level of obedience, so if you are only reading and not applying, these lessons will be only partially successful.

Each day you will have three practical suggestions.

Empower—This section ends the lesson. It answers the “*what’s next?*” question. It also connects that lesson with something called

the gospel (*good news*). You'll be called on to answer, What is the good news in this lesson? What can I do with this information this week? How can my life be changed for the better as a result?

3. Small-group study or personal study:

This resource is just an introduction, there is much more to learn! The suggested pace is one per week for a small group. The lessons can be studied in homes, workplaces, during church services, or wherever God leads you. They are simple, easy, and very practical. The lesson should take around 30 minutes to complete.

4. What to aim for:

Remember these axioms as you study:

Done is better than perfect

Progress over perfection

Enjoy the lessons.

Engage them with an open mind and open heart and pray that God will lead you into His truth.



Lesson

Trouble

We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

Someone has said that *“peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of God.”* In today’s lesson we will learn how to act and react when trouble arises. The reality of both problems and blessings is that they often come unannounced. Let’s search together for solutions

Open

1. What two characteristics define our human existence, according to Job?

- *“How frail is humanity! How short is life, how full of trouble!”* (Job 14:1 NLT).
- Life is _____

- Life is full of _____
- 2. The Bible mentions several areas where we may be experiencing trouble. What are they?
- Trouble in relationships because of lack or need. Read Proverbs 19:4, 7.
- Trouble because of other people's attacks. Read Psalm 25:19.
- Trouble because of our own poor choices or sin. Read Psalm 38:18.

Of these three causes of trouble, which one would you say is presently affecting you?

3. Instead of spending your life focused on worrying about your problems, what better option does Scripture suggest we take? Read Philippians 4:6.

4. The apostle Paul had his share of difficult situations. Even though he was troubled by his circumstances, what did he experience in the midst of his pain? Read 2 Corinthians 7:4.

5. Read Romans 8:35–37. List at least four things that the Bible guarantees cannot separate you from God and His love:

Practice

If and when you experience trouble, remember to apply the following principles to your life.

1. Pray about it. *“I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble”*

(*Psalm 142:2, NIV*). You don't have to carry your burden alone. You

Lesson 1 - Trouble

don't need to feel as though you are fighting by yourself. What problem can we pray for right now? You can write it here if you wish: God, please help me with _____

2. Don't worry about it. *"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (Matthew 6:34, NIV). Why? Let me give you three reasons:

- Worry doesn't make sense. If you can fix it, do it. If you can't, worrying won't make a difference.
- Worry doesn't make it better. Worry makes it bigger.
- Worry doesn't increase your faith. By worrying, you minimize God's power and increase your anxiety level.

3. Trust God to help you through it. God uses a three-pronged method to deal with our troubles:

- a. He delivers us from trouble. *"Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress"* (Psalm 107:6, NIV).
- b. He comforts us in trouble. God *"...comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God"* (2 Corinthians 1:4, NIV).
- c. He will eventually eliminate all trouble. *"and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels"* (2 Thessalonians 1:7, NIV).

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Empower

My decision today

With God's help I will seek to worry less, pray more, and trust completely. I will make my requests known to God and will wait on His response. The good news is that God is bigger than any of my problems and that He cares for me.



Lesson
Connection

We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

Kids' prayers are the best. Before we go on to our study, let's read a short one that will put a smile on your face.

A little boy prayed, *"Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and me. Oh, please take care of Yourself, God. If anything happens to You, we're gonna be in a big mess."*

Open

1. What important question did the disciples ask Jesus? Read Luke 11:1.

2. The Lord's Prayer is a classic prayer, which is found in Matthew 6:9–13. Read it now. What are the first two words? _____

Why do you think God wants us to see him as a Father? Is it easy or difficult to picture God as a Father? Why?

3. Let's look together at four characteristics of effective prayer.

- a. Prayer is best when it's honest. Read 1 Samuel 1:10.
- b. Prayer admits our weaknesses and protects us in temptation. Read Matthew 26:41.
- c. Prayer works best when it's accompanied with actions. Read 2 Chronicles 7:14.
- d. Prayer is more powerful when we seek God, not just what He can do for us. Read Psalm 66:20.

4. What hinders the effectiveness of prayer? Read Mark 11:25.

5. It is important to ask God for what we need. What else should we do as we pray? Read

Philippians 4:6.

Practice

Now comes the time for practice. You may choose to do these prayers now or later by yourself. We can learn these principles together. God encourages us to do the following:

1. Be balanced. Prayer that is effective looks in three directions:

- a. Prayer looks up. We focus on God and what He is.
 - Read 2 Corinthians 9:8. God is _____.
 - Read 1 John 5:14. God is _____.

Lesson 2 - Connection

- Read Deuteronomy 4:31. God is _____ .
When we focus on God, our perspective changes.

- b.** Prayer looks inward. We recognize, confess, and address our sin and short-comings. Read Psalm 38:18.
- c.** Prayer looks around. We seek to bless others and pray on their behalf. Read James 5:15.

2. Be careful. One of the most important principles that you will learn today is: prayer is seeking God, not just for what He can do for you. He is not a means to an end, even though He is our provider. When you pray, seek Him, not just His blessings.

3. Be bold. Read Hebrews 4:16. This passage tells us that as God's children we can go to Him without fear. Don't say no to yourself by failing to ask God. Pray according to His will and in Jesus's name, and let Him decide what is best for you.

Empower

My decision today

This week I commit to pray. I will use the three-pronged approach to prayer: I will look up and focus on God first; then I will look at myself honestly and address what needs to change within; and finally, as a grateful response to His grace, I will pray and help others. I understand that God accepts and hears my prayer not because of who prays, but because He loves to have me pray. As I decide to develop my relationship with God through prayer, I understand that the good news is that God hears me and loves to talk to me no matter what I have done or who I am.



We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

Start by reading Luke 10:38–42.

Open

1. Who showed up at Martha’s house? Read Luke 10:38. (*Clue: It’s more than one person.*)

2. Describe Martha’s emotions. Write at least three of them here.

Lesson 3 - Priorities

- 3. The name Martha means “is becoming bitter.”** Why do you think Jesus mentions her name twice? What could be making her bitter?
- 4. As you look at Martha’s attitude, how do you imagine her talking to Jesus in verse 40?**
- 5. Jesus told Martha that Mary had “chosen” what was better.** How hard is it for you to take time out to spend with Jesus?

Practice

In order to refocus your life, you must make the following three decisions daily.

- 1. Choose the important over the urgent.** Mary chose the important, while Martha chose the urgent. Beware of the “*tyranny of the urgent*,” which seeks to divert you from concentrating on the important issues in life like God, family, and personal growth. What are one or two urgent things you keep doing that keep you away from the important ones?
- 2. Choose the best over the good.** The most difficult decision for a human being is not the choice between good and bad; it’s between good and better. In what areas of your life are you settling for good enough?
- 3. Choose the permanent over the temporary.**

The latest fad—summer blockbuster, phone, clothing—looks to gain our immediate attention. They all have something in common: they are temporary. Don’t concentrate your efforts on people, pastimes, and problems that will not be here ten years from now. What is one problem you are fretting about that you know will soon pass?

Empower

My decision today

This week, I'll memorize these three words: important, best, permanent. Every time a decision needs to be made, I'll ask myself if the choice I'm making is in line with those three words. I will share what I learned this week with a friend who needs to hear it. Remember, you are not a human doing. You are a human being. Your actions don't make you more valuable to God. The cross reminds you that Jesus died before you could do something to deserve it. The gospel says it's done. It's finished. It's complete. Now rest in it.

Lesson

Dollars and Sense

We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

Money is neither moral nor immoral, neither good nor bad. It's like a brick that can be used to build a nice chimney or break the window of the neighbor who plays loud music at 3 a.m. The problem is not money itself, but how it's used. It adopts the characteristics of its owner and makes that person more of what he or she already is.

Open

1. “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower, won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it” (Luke 14:28, NIV)? This short verse has four biblical principles for better administration of our finances. Answer the questions that follow the principles.

a. Set goals. The goal of the man was to build a tower. What

are your financial goals? Write one down here: _____

-
- b. b. Think first. What did the man do before he began to build? Are you an impulse buyer, or do you think first?
 - c. c. Budget expenses. What is the true purpose of a budget? What holds you back from developing one for yourself?
 - d. d. Always persevere. Is it easy or difficult for you to finish what you begin?

2. The book of Job has a great passage concerning finances. It reads: “If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment” (Job 36:11, NIV). According to this verse, what is our role regarding finances? We should obey and _____ God.

3. Jesus told a sobering story of the ever-present danger of concentrating too much on material items. Read Luke 12:16–20. What lesson do you think Jesus was trying to teach us?

4. One of the most freeing aspects of the gospel (good news) is that our worth is not in what we produce, gain, or possess. Instead, what does Jesus invite us to freely receive? Read Revelation 22:17. _____

Practice

Here are three more practical lessons about finances:

1. Don’t let yourself be enticed. The Bible gives the following advice in Job 36:18, “Be careful that no one entices you by riches” (NIV). Is there an object in your life that is enticing you to fall in love with it?

Lesson 4 - Dollars and Sense

2. Don't become obsessed. Check all that apply to you (these will not be discussed out loud; they're personal).

- Do you neglect your family because of your work?
- Is it hard for you to leave your work behind at your worksite?
- Do you continue thinking about work during vacations and times of rest?
- Do you think about work first thing when you get up and last thing as you go to sleep?
- Do you think about work or your finances when you pray, read the Bible, or are in church?
- In selecting your career, were you thinking about how much money you would earn? Do you buy things on sale even though you don't need them?
- When you go out to eat, do you eat more when someone else is paying?
- Is making money the main object of your life?

3. Don't commit yourself to others' debts. The Bible is clear about this. Proverbs 22:26, 27 counsels us, *"Don't promise to be responsible for someone else's debts. If you should be unable to pay, they will take away even your bed"* (GNT). What danger does a person face who signs for another's debt? Mention two reasons it's not advisable to do so.

Empower

When the famous magnate John D. Rockefeller died, someone asked his bookkeeper, *"How much money did Rockefeller leave?"*

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The bookkeeper replied, *“He left everything.”*

My decision today

With God’s help I choose to manage my finances in a way that honors God and values my health and my family. I pray to find my worth in what God accomplished for me on the cross and not in my temporary earthly accomplishments. The gospel frees you from having to produce in order to be noticed, loved, or valued. You are valued, loved, and accepted because of His sacrifice, not your success. You are loved. Period.



We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

“I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people” (Jeremiah 8:21, 22).

Everyone has experienced hurt. For some, emotional and physical pain is a constant reminder that words and actions matter. Once again, this is a topic that Scripture addresses at length.

Open

There are several causes of pain. Among them are physical, spiritual, mental/emotional, and sexual abuse. We fall into one of two categories: We have either experienced abuse or we know a person who has.

1. Who is responsible for the pain in this world? Read Revelation 12:9; Romans 1:24.

2. There are at least four reasons for your pain.

Take a moment to look at the four categories below, then analyze your painful experiences and ascribe a percentage to each one:

- Intentional hurt from others _____
- Unintentional hurt from others _____
- Intentional hurt from yourself _____
- Unintentional hurt from yourself _____

3. Even in Bible times God provided guidelines for respect and consequences for abuse of every kind. Let's review two of them.

- a. Abuse through incest. Read Deuteronomy 27:22.
- b. Respect for and care of children. Read Matthew 18:6.

4. Hurt can create deep wounds, especially if you don't talk about it and forgive it. Hurt prospers in secrecy. Here are two suggestions from the Bible about the importance of sharing your struggles.

- a. How did David feel when he wasn't able to speak about his situation? Read Psalm 32:3. Why is it important to share with a responsible and qualified person what happened to us?
- b. What is another blessing of sharing your pain with another? Read James 5:16.

5. Why is it so important to forgive? What does forgiving really mean? What is one thing we can do? Read Luke 6:28. _____

Lesson 5 - Hurts

6. What can we do for people who have experienced hurt? Read Hebrews 12:12, 13; Isaiah 35:3, 4.

7. What does God promise concerning the end of all hurt? Revelation 21:3, 4.

Practice

These are three important actions you can take:

8. Deal with it correctly. According to recent findings, more than half of women and at

least forty percent of men experience abuse.

How do we deal with it? Some try to bury it, ignore it, or mitigate the pain with addiction. Instead, speak about it, address it, and understand how God can bring healing to your life. What proactive steps are you taking to address the pain in your life?

9. Forgive it completely. Holding in resentment is like drinking rat poison and hoping the rat will die. Therefore, you must forgive. Forgiving does not mean the restoration of the relationship or welcoming into your home a known abuser. It means that you treat with respect and love the one who hurt you. If you have been a victim, the first step is to forgive.

Who do you need to forgive today?

10. Grow from it. The moment you forgive, you start growing. As you leave the past behind, sharing your experiences can help other people, either by keeping them from suffering what you did or by comforting those who can identify with your pain.

Empower

This week, pray for God to help you do the following three things:

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deal with, forgive, and grow from painful experiences in your life. If you have never had such things happen to you, be thankful and look for ways to bless others who have. The cross of Christ shows us that the God of the Bible saw our plight, entered our suffering, endured our trials, and can restore all things. While other religions teach that man can work himself upward to get to God, Christianity shows a God who descends and rescues us. He seldom provides answers; He ultimately provides solutions.



Lesson

Transformation

We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

We were created for relationships. They determine in large part our well-being. Billy Graham had it right when he stated, *“God is more interested in your future and your relationships than you are.”* That is true, but what also is true is that life is painful. That’s why Jesus has promised to return to complete our transformation. He will come again to make all things right. The end of the world as we know it good news, no fear based.

Open

Revelation 21:4: *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”*

Isaiah 65:17: *“Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth.”*

1. **How did God want people to live?** Genesis 1:26
2. **What interfered with the plans God had for His children?** Genesis 3:1–13
3. **What did God do to transform the situation?** John 3:16
4. **At what point does our transformation begin?** 2 Corinthians 5:17
5. **God promises to transform our reality permanently when He comes back.**

What four things does God promise to eliminate forever? Revelation 21:4

- a _____
- b _____
- c _____
- d _____

Practice

The way in which God transforms the human being occurs in three stages:

1. When we accept the sacrifice of Jesus, the transformation begins. We must invite Him to live in our lives and begin a daily relationship with Him. We are transformed into new creatures. This is known as a spiritual new birth or conversion. Have you invited Jesus into your life?

2. As we walk with Christ, the transformation continues. Throughout the Christian life, spiritual transformation occurs, and we begin to see spiritual fruit such as patience, kindness, self-control,

Lesson 6 - Transformation

and joy. The purpose of this process is that every day we look more like Jesus. This stage is called sanctification.

3. When Jesus Christ comes the second time, He will complete the transformation. Christ promised to return to transform the reality of humanity forever. The Bible tells us, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone”* (Revelation 21:1). Isaiah 65:17–18 confirms this when it says, *“I am creating new heavens and a new earth, and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.”*

Identify the things you want God to transform in your life permanently as you prepare for His second coming:

- Relationships
- Character
- Finance
- Work
- Decision making
- Other: _____

Also in your private time, it is helpful to identify areas of your life in which you have not yet permitted God to transform you (*family, work, finances, marriage, character, grudges, wounds*):

Recognize the promise of God to transform your life forever, and memorize Revelation 21:4: *“He will wipe every tear from [my eyes], and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”*

Empower

My decision today

- a. I will intentionally seek to surround myself with people who will build me up and not tear me down, people who are interested in my transformation. I will put my trust in Jesus and find my acceptance first and foremost from my Father, who promised to come back for me and finish my transformation. Since the gospel frees me from fear, I realize that I am loved and accepted by God because of His son Jesus, who is not only my Savior but also my Friend; and that He loves me and will soon return for me.



Lesson

Failure

We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

“If it doesn’t matter who wins or loses, then why do they keep score” (Vince Lombardi)?

We all like winners. That’s why we keep score. If truthful, we will admit that there are areas in our lives in which we could be doing better. Let’s remember three powerful principles as we deal with the topic of failure:

- Failure is what happened, not who you are.
- You can fail, but you are not a failure.
- Everyone fails—everyone. It’s a matter of when, not if.

Open

1. Why do people fail? *“Pride leads to destruction, and arrogance to downfall” (Proverbs 16:18, GNT).* The main reason is that we are prideful. The three most dangerous words in the English language are *“I already know!” “Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity, but hasty shortcuts lead to poverty” (Proverbs 21:5; emphasis added).* We fail because we take _____ . In what areas do you tend to take shortcuts? Feel free to either share or just reflect privately.

Mark all that apply:

- Relationships
- Exercise/diet
- Finances
- Education
- Spirituality
- Other _____

2. When we fail, it’s important to examine ourselves and find out why it happened. After we have taken an honest look at ourselves, what is a great step to take? Read Lamentations 3:40 and write your thoughts here.

3. An important step to take when you fail is to look in Scripture for hope, claiming the promises of God for your life. Read these

Lesson 7 - Failure

three beautiful ones that you can apply today:

Psalms 50:5; Psalm 34:7; and Isaiah 41:10.

Practice

Different people will have different reactions when they fail. Here are three common ones:

1. Some will quit. *“If your boss is angry at you, don’t quit! A quiet spirit can overcome even great mistakes” (Ecclesiastes 10:4).* Don’t give up on God. Don’t give up on relationships.

Don’t give up on your dreams.

2. Some will blame. *“Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘This is all your fault! I put my servant into your arms, but now that she’s pregnant she treats me with contempt. The Lord will show who’s wrong—you or me!’” (Genesis 16:5).*

3. Some will grow. *“I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize. My friends, I don’t feel that I have already arrived. But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead. I run toward the goal, so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven. This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done”*

(Philippians 3:12–14, CEV; emphasis add-d).

Empower

My decision today

With God’s help I will remember that failure is an event, not who I am. I can learn from my failures, but I won’t be defined by them. Christ’s death and resurrection teach me that, from my darkest hour, great blessing can come. I choose to trust Jesus and His plan instead of my own.



We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

It's been dubbed the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Black Death. In the UK, it's the most common reason employees take long-term sick leave. It costs American companies hundreds of billion dollars a year. In Japan, it's a fatal epidemic. What is it? Stress. What is the antidote? Rest and balance. The bible tells us that *"The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest'"* (Exodus 33:14, NIV). God gave us a day of rest called the sabbath. It's a blessing as you will see during this lesson.

Open

We have two important decisions regarding rest, balance, and the Sabbath.

Lesson 8 - Rest

A. Choose the important over the urgent.

Because God knew that we would struggle with balance, He gave us the Sabbath.

1. What three things did God himself do on the Sabbath? *“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array” (Genesis 2:1–3, NIV). “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Genesis 2:2, 3, NIV).*

2. How is the Sabbath called in the following verse? It is a _____. *“They must realize that the Sabbath is the Lord’s gift to you...” (Exodus 16:29).*

A. Choose better over good. Some have said you can worship God on any day of the week. While this is partially true, it is scripturally sound to set apart the seventh day as a day of rest, reset, recovery, and intentional worship.

3. Don’t settle for good when better is available.

Note the best in the texts below.

- In Genesis God rested, called it holy and blessed it (*Genesis 2:1–3*)
- In Exodus, Sabbath is the fourth commandment—the link (*Exodus 4:8–11*)
- Jesus worshiped on the seventh day *“as was his custom” (Luke 4:16, NIV)* Mary rested on the Sabbath (*Luke 23:46*).
- The disciples worshiped after the resurrection (*Acts 13:42*).

- Paul worshiped on the Sabbath (Acts 17:2).
- In the New earth, the celebration continues (Isaiah 66:22–23)

Practice

1. What blessings can you point out as a result of keeping the Sabbath?

- a. *“Keep the Sabbath day holy. Don’t pursue your own interests on that day, but enjoy the Sabbath and speak of it with delight as the Lord’s holy day. Honor the Sabbath in everything you do on that day, and don’t follow your own desires or talk idly. Then the Lord will be your delight. I will give you great honor and satisfy you with the inheritance I promised to your ancestor Jacob. I, the Lord, have spoken!”* (Isaiah 58:13).

2. This gift of rest:

- a. It’s grace-oriented. *“You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your oxen and donkeys and other livestock, and any foreigners living among you. All your male and female servants must rest as you do. Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out with his strong hand and powerful arm. That is why the Lord your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day”* (Deuteronomy 5:13).
- b. It’s permanent. *“All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal”* (Psalm 119:160, NIV).

Lesson 8 - Rest

Empower

My decision today

I accept that on my own it will be very difficult to achieve balance. I receive the gift of the Sabbath and thank God for his sacrifice for me, and by the grace of God, I seek to rest, delight, and worship on this day as God requires.



We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

After church, where she had been taught about the Second Coming, a little girl quizzed her mother. *“Mommy, do you believe Jesus will come back?”*

“Yes.”

“Today?”

“Yes.”

“In a few minutes?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Mommy, would you comb my hair?”

She saw the second coming of Jesus as a good thing. So should we. One of the reasons is that we will see the loved ones we have lost along the way.

Lesson 9 - Life

Open

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13–17, NIV; emphasis added).

After you have read the text above, answer these questions.

1. Will the dead precede the living to heaven?
2. When will the resurrection happen?
3. Who will call the dead to life?
4. Who will rise first?
5. What guarantees our resurrection (verse 14)?

Practice

1. Believe in the risen Savior. The most awesome thing about death is that Jesus already defeated it! He even mocks it (*1 Corinthians 15*), but the good news is that He wants to share that victory with us. He created us to live, and as we connect with Him, the source of life, we have life. Have you surrendered your life to Jesus? Trust

your life to Him today. Whom have you lost that you would like to see again?

2. Understand death. People have many different ideas about what happens when we die. The Bible is not silent on this subject. Here are some facts: Life equals God's breath + body (*Genesis 2:7*). Death is the reverse (*Ecclesiastes 12:7*). When we die, we die (*Ecclesiastes 9:5–6*; *Psalms 104:29*; *Psalms 146:4*; *Acts 2:29, 34*). The word “soul” is a widely misunderstood concept; it means a “living being,” which the Bible says will die (*Ezekiel 18:4, 20*). People who die are neither in heaven nor in hell. They are asleep. Those who die, having accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, are waiting to hear the powerful voice of their Creator. What are some of the misconceptions in movies and TV about what happens when we die?

3. Wait for the Second Coming. The text says that we will enjoy heaven until the Second Coming of Jesus, not before (*Luke 14:14*). Jesus comes to reward all of us, according to what we have done—but none go ahead of the rest (*Revelation 22:12*). We will all go together. We will enter heaven and receive life together. It will be a great reunion.

Empower

Do you want to be there? Then make the best decision ever: Give your life to Jesus today. Live life as if He will come today. Have you lost a loved one? Maybe a friend, a family member, or spouse. Are you concerned about your own future? Today you can find hope in the promise of the resurrection of Jesus.



Lesson

Faith

We All Have Problems—HOPE

Hear

There are four questions that people like us have asked themselves throughout history:

1. Where do I come from?
2. How should I live?
3. What is the purpose of my life?
4. Where am I going?

The gospel (*good news*) answers these questions. The gospel is good news, not just good advice. What's the good news? Let's study the basic tenets of the gospel according to Jesus.

Open

There are five significant components of the gospel:

1. What we are. How does the Bible describe the human condition? Read Romans 3:10–12. We are _____.
Read Ephesians 2:1. We are _____.
2. Accountability for our actions. Every action and decision has a consequence. Read Hebrews 9:27. Think about it. Accountability is built into us. We demand it from our civic leaders, teachers, and family. In a macro sense, God will hold us accountable for the decisions we have made.
3. Inability to make it right on our own. Enter Jesus. What did Jesus do about our condition? Read Colossians 2:13.
4. The death and resurrection of Jesus, a historical fact we can accept or reject, both have implications. Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–8. Take the time to analyze the details in that passage.
5. Our surrender to Jesus that results in life transformation. Notice this passage: *“For our gospel did not come to you merely in words, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction [in much assurance]”* (1 Thessalonians 1:5, NIV).

A changed life is not the means to salvation, but it is definitely the result of understanding and experiencing the gospel in your life.

Practice

Here is the best summary concerning how we enter and stay in relationship with Christ:

1. A relationship with Jesus affects our past. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17. We have all made mistakes, errors, and wrong choices that

Lesson 10 - Faith

have produced pain in ourselves and others. The process of dealing with the past starts with two elements:

- a. **Confession:** When you confess your sins to God, you admit responsibility.
- b. **Repentance:** When you repent, you recognize that change is needed.

2. A relationship with Jesus affects our present. Living as a person who has been forgiven has practical implications. Notice this passage: *“Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel?”* (Ezekiel 18:31). It’s freeing to know we don’t have to live shackled by past mistakes and worried about future issues. Because we have been forgiven and accepted by God, we can do the same for others.

3. A relationship with God affects our future.

Read Psalm 31:15. One of the most important ways the gospel affects our lives is in helping us live with the hope of a better future. All through Scripture, prophecies are made about deliverance, salvation, and restoration. We can know our future is secure when we see how God has fulfilled His prophecies in the past. If you are interested in a study of Bible prophecy, the next set of lessons (*Part 2*) will dive deep into that subject. We invite you to join us and continue that study.

Empower

My decision today

I acknowledge that I am a sinner. I give control of my life to God

Roger Hernández

and ask Jesus to be my Savior and leader. I believe that no matter how awful my sins, God is not mad at me. Instead, my heavenly Father allowed Jesus to take upon Himself all the guilt, shame, and rejection I deserve. I choose to follow Christ.

Five Changes in Pastoral Leadership Post-Pandemic

I love to encourage pastoral leaders and walk alongside them in their often-challenging journey. After 3 years of conversations, mentoring, and learning I have detected some patterns that can inform your leadership in these turbulent, troubling, and tremendous times.

1. Hesitant. People are more hesitant to start a new project, take on a new responsibility or begin a new ministry. Uncertainty creates hesitancy and we live in uncertain times. Be patient. Leaders see the end from the beginning. Members usually don't. Try this: trial balloons, temporary assignments, and small, manageable tasks that are clearly connected to the overall vision.

2. Slower. Not only are they hesitant to begin, but when they do, they move at a slower pace. Pushing, shaming, or coercing will work with some, repel most, and eventually hurt everyone. Celebrate movement not mastery.

Try this. Make a point to use positive examples of engagement in EVERY message.

3. Personal. Think less about large stages and more about living rooms. Christianity is at its core, personal. Asking from the platform for more engagement, while neglecting the personal constant connection will be obsolete soon if not now. This is not a problem for all pastors, or most pastors for that matter, but I have seen an uptick in the desire to center our influence on what happens in the houses of worship one morning a week and not what happens in people's homes the other six days.

Try this. Visit. Be curious about their interests, and important milestones and you will see a difference.

4. Deeper. Deeper doesn't mean less fruitful, it means more attention to spiritual disciplines. I have had conversations with several pastors in the last 3 years that have seen troublemakers leave and churches unite after a sustained emphasis on prayer and fasting. Don't skip over this one too quickly. It's simple, but not easy, especially when you don't see immediate results.

Try this. 40 days of fasting. Fewer announcements and more prayer time.

5. Polarized. From now to the foreseeable future, you will lead a polarized congregation. People have opinions about opinions. One important task the pastor holds is to manage the delicate line between being prophetic and pastoral. Speaking truth in love while being clear with church hijackers about where the line is a necessary leadership skill.

Try this. Spend time with people outside of the church that disagree with you theologically and see them as humans, not enemies.

Praying for you. Here is my number, if you want to unpack further: 5032676880.