



MYTHS ABOUT YOUTH MINISTRIES

by Stephen Bohr

My Dear Friends:

A recent article in one of our denominational publications bore the title, “It’s not the Message.” In my newsletter remarks this month I would like to respond, in Christian charity, to some of the basic premises that the two authors highlighted in their article.

Basically, the authors share several reasons why they believe that our youth are leaving the church. Unfortunately most of the blame is attributed to the church itself. It saddens me to see the church bear the brunt of the blame for the exodus of our youth. It is true that the church is partially to blame but if we are going to play the blame game, there is plenty to go around. Lamentably, the authors of this article are captives of a series of myths about the reasons why our youth are leaving the church.

Myth # 1: The church is to blame for the exodus of our youth.

I believe the exodus of our youth from church is far more complex than the authors of this article realize. The authors suggest that the church should fire itself for failing to retain the youth. But is this fair?

The church has the youth an average of about five to six hours a week while the school, the parents and the media have them for over one hundred hours (allowing for eight hours of sleep per day). Shouldn’t we also fire the parents, the teachers and the media? Why not blame television and the worldly culture of our times which makes it so difficult for the church to “compete”? Furthermore, why can’t we understand that the youth themselves must bear a good share of the blame? After all, God has given them freedom of choice. If they use it wrongly, should they not bear their share of the blame? Will they say to Jesus on the Day of Judgment: “Well, the church didn’t meet my needs”?

Myth # 2: “Our young people know our message and are tired of hearing it.”

This myth simply does not reflect reality. The authors assume that our seventeen and eighteen year olds know our message. With all due respect, what planet do the authors live on? I have been Senior Pastor of Fresno Central Church for almost eleven years and know that nothing could be further from the truth! Just try getting the youth to quote more than one text from the Bible on any doctrine of our church and see how it goes! Obviously there are exceptions but the exception merely proves the rule. The sad reality is that our youth are not hearing our distinctive message in family worship, in our school Bible classes and from our pulpits! There is a famine in the land for the Word of God.

Myth # 3: “Our message doesn’t change people; the Holy Spirit changes people.”

This slogan sounds nice except for the fact that the Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit changes people through the message. The Holy Spirit and the Scripture message are inseparable. The Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum, He works through the medium of Scripture to change people’s hearts and lives (see Romans 10:17; Ephesians 5:26; Psalm 119:9-11; Ephesians 6:17). The unique mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to take the message of the three angels to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Myth # 4: “If we were true Christians, we wouldn’t tell people to change their behaviors before they can become one of us.”

This statement fails to take into account the clear counsel of the Spirit of Prophecy. Notice volume five of the Testimonies, p. 172:

“The accession of members who have not been renewed in heart and reformed in life is a source of weakness to the church. This fact is often ignored. Some ministers and churches are so desirous of securing an increase of numbers that they do not bear faithful testimony against unchristian habits and practices. Those who accept the truth are not taught that they cannot safely be worldlings in conduct while they are Christians in name. Heretofore they were Satan’s subjects; henceforth they are to be subjects of Christ. The life must testify to the change of leaders. Public opinion favors a profession of Christianity. Little self-denial or self-sacrifice is required in order to put on a form of godliness and to have one’s name enrolled upon the church book. Hence many join the church without first becoming united to Christ. In this Satan triumphs. Such converts are his most efficient agents. They serve as decoys to other souls. They are false lights, luring the unwary to perdition. It is in vain that men seek to make the Christian’s path broad and pleasant for worldlings. God has not smoothed or widened the rugged, narrow way. If we would enter into life, we must follow the same path which Jesus and His disciples trod--the path of humility, self-denial, and sacrifice.” (Emphasis mine)

At Fresno Central we try to treat people with love and respect and accept them as they are. We do our best (despite our human frailties and failings) to make them feel like they belong. But does this mean that we must accept them into church membership before they have renounced unchristian habits and practices? I think not! God never leaves people as they are—He always raises them to a higher standard. We are to love and embrace people but this does not mean that they should be baptized and join our church while they are violating clear Biblical principles.

Myth # 5: The community should not identify Seventh-day Adventists “as non-smoking, non-drinking, non-dancing, vegetarians; rather the community should describe us as the nicest people in town.”

Shouldn’t people rather identify Seventh-day Adventists as the nicest non-smoking, non-drinking, non-dancing, vegetarians in town? Does one thing cancel out the other? It is not either/or but both/and.

Myth # 6: “Our number one problem is that we think the message of the church, which we believe to be a true and accurate message (knowledge) transforms.”

The authors masterfully create a straw man. I have never believed this and I doubt whether many others do either. Although it is true that religious information does not transform in and of itself, it does have great power when it is used by the Holy Spirit. If you don't believe that information changes and transforms the lives of our young people, just look at the behavioral influence which television, music, video games and movies have upon them.

Myth # 7: “The most important commandments are to love God and one another.”

This is certainly a true statement if we define love as the apostle Paul does in Romans 13:10: “Love is the fulfilling of the law,” or as Jesus defines it in John 14:15: “If you love me, keep my commandments.” Sadly the authors seem to dichotomize love and the Commandments. When they say that truth is ineffective if we don't love, they should balance the statement by saying that love without the truth is mere sentimentalism. The Apostle Paul provided the balance when he said that we are to “speak the truth in love.”

If we follow the counsel of our two authors, the church is in trouble indeed! In its one hundred and sixty year history, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been kept together through the work of the Holy Spirit who has preserved the integrity of our message, our lifestyle and our mission. If it had not been for this, the church would have broken up and fallen apart long ago. I believe the reason why the church in North America has faced so many splits and perplexities is because we have downplayed and in some cases even forgotten the “faith once delivered to the saints.”

On a positive note I would like to say that I am encouraged by things that I see happening among the young lay people in the church. I am thrilled when I see lay driven movements such as the General Youth Conference with its various branches nationwide. At these meetings one can sense a deep hunger and thirst for truth and certainty in a post-modern world where doubt and “epistemological diversity” seem to be the rule of the day.

I have also been encouraged recently by several college students who have recently come back to our church after an extended absence in the wilderness of uncertainty. Their expressed interest has been to study what makes the Seventh-day Adventist Church tick. I am also encouraged by my frequent trips to Latin America (where I grew up) where I see our youth pumped up about our distinctive mission, message and lifestyle to such a degree that they are reaching out to their non-Adventist friends.

Let us pray that the Lord will bring revival and reformation in our homes, our schools, our churches and our personal lives.

Article by Stephen Bohr/Secrets Unsealed
PO Box 6545, Fresno, CA 93703-6545
559-264-2300 – 888-REV-1412
www.secretsunsealed.org

