

THE WINNING OF SOULS—IS THIS TRULY OUR ONLY PURPOSE?

This is an essay of another view of total evangelism by Barrington Brennen, June 15, 2015

For decades I have been thinking about the mission of the Adventist Church, or what some say is our mission--Evangelism, the "winning of souls" for Christ. I am writing these thoughts as an ordained minister of the Adventist Church for over 37 years and a mental health professional for almost 20 years.

With the Adventist mission of evangelism comes an assumed definition which might not be right. This assumed definition, in my opinion, narrows the meaning of evangelism. Let me challenge you. Suppose I say that the only purpose for the Adventist Church is to win souls for the kingdom of God, would that be truly the full or only purpose of our church?

I have heard over and over that the only reason for our existence is to "win souls." Now maybe "to win souls" may need to be defined. It might have different meanings for some people.

Here is my thinking challenge for you. The real mission of the Adventist Church is not to win souls for the kingdom--meaning just bringing people into the church through evangelistic series. The real mission is winning and keeping souls for the kingdom. Evangelism has to mean keeping as well as winning.

I have a philosophy about evangelism. Here it is: "Those we keep will win others." It is not those we win will win others. No way! The nurturing agent is the most powerful tool for winning--not preaching. We also say that if you want more sheep then feed your sheep. But is the psyche and structure of our church facilitating that view? Do we really stop to feed our sheep? Or do we just throw them a bundle of hay while we go to another evangelism project?

It is my view that the evangelism culture in our church has done more to push people out of the church than to keep them in. We focus on "what is the number" of the converts. Yes, the noise in the market (the evangelistic series) will attract more "customers" in the beginning. However, when the "customers" find out about the high price of the goods or the poor customer service, or even the poor upkeep of the premises, they leave and go to another "store."

Another point is when the mindset is that the main or best form of outreach (winning of souls) is an evangelistic series, it minimizes the power of other equally powerful methods that do not need an evangelistic series.

It is my view that our members are not taught that evangelism is inclusive of keeping and winning. I am postulating that if we truly focus on nurture--keeping of souls--we will have more winning of souls. If we focus on wining of souls only, with little or no nurture, we will win lots of people in the short run but lose more in the long run.

Evangelism as "wining of souls" is a concept that needs to be revamped. It drives too many to focus on numbers. It fuels the methods of our church services, appeals, and how quickly we have baptisms without adequate preparation. This happens a lot in areas of the world where evangelism is trumped as our "only focus."

It is my view also that evangelism as the "winning of souls" is more likely to cultivate legalism than evangelism as the keeping of souls first, then winning. I know that many of you are thinking that the Adventist Church does have the "keeping and winning." That is not really so. Take an objective look at why we do things: How we make our appeals; how often we have appeals for persons to get baptized; how we set our goals for winning; how often we have "winning" meetings.

I can hear the preacher saying with his booming voice: "Go and win souls." I do not hear them say also, "stay, and let's keep the souls." We also instill a level of guilt in the members if they "stay" and do not "go." In other words, if they "keep" and not "win." Our narrative must change. The language we use impact the psyche and drive of members.

We have pastors who have the gift of winning. Even the apostle Paul mentions evangelism as a gift of the Spirit. Since the common meaning of evangelism is "wining" only, these pastors' evangelism focus sometimes neglect the smaller but most important things about winning--keeping. On the other hand, we can have some pastors who say they are focusing on "keeping of souls," but they are really lazy. They really do not nurture or feed their flock. I have two serious questions for you to think about. Is it fair to say that evangelists should not be church pastors? Is it fair to say that evangelists create numerical growth and not necessarily spiritual growth of the church?

How do we "win" souls? It has been my observation that for some of us the winning of souls include these and more: (1) Frighten the people to get them to the altar. Hit them over their heads with the "truth." "You are going to hell if you do not come to Jesus now, now, now! Come! Come! Come!" (2) Tell the people that they will no longer want to sin if they come to Jesus (False hope). (3) Quickly squeeze them into the front door of the church, but neglect to close the back door. (4) Make them feel good on the day of baptism, and forget where they live after that. (5) Count how many got in, and neglect to count how many stayed. (6) Shock them with the messages of the "Last Days Events," the 2300 days prophecy, seven last plagues, etc. (7) Put them in a "New Believers" Bible class, but when it is over, we still do not know much about the new believers.

What are my views of the "keeping" of souls? They are: 1. Inviting people to the altar through a loving call; 2. Helping them apply Christian teaching to practical, every-day living; 3. Using the pulpit to teach more than preach; 4. Reminding them that there will be no quiz on the 2300 Days Prophecy at kingdom's gates; Knowing how to explain it is not required for salvation. The "quiz" will be on how much we showed the love of Jesus to others. "By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." 5. Doing lots of praising and not shaming from the pulpit; 6. Meeting the needs--emotional as well and material--where practical; 7. Having a "spiritual guardian" to be a friend to each new believer for one year; 8. Lovingly responding to the social and emotional needs of individuals and families; (And much more).

A true keeping and winning program is an active power, not passive. It is a passion for souls--a passion for souls to get into the "kingdom" and stay there. Many of us will be found guilty of the abuse called "neglect" (spiritual and pastoral neglect) before the great judgement seat of Christ. It is neglecting to do the most important things that matter to keep those we win to Christ. That is what matters most. The next time you start preaching a sermon to your church members, remember the end result is first keeping and not just winning.

Is it reasonable for me to ask you to think about a passion for souls as an encompassing phrase--keeping and winning? "Those we keep will win others."

Our responsibility is to expose the gospel and not to impose it.

Also, do your best to make the gospel attractive and not a pain in the neck.