

The Adventist Church Dilemma with Evangelism

# The Winning of Souls

*Is winning of souls truly our only purpose for the existence of the Adventist Church?*

This is an essay with another view of total evangelism by Barrington Brennen, June 15, 2015, Updated January 8, 2020

*Haven't you heard it loud and clear? It has been riveted in our minds for decades. It is this:*

*"The only purpose for the existence of the Adventist Church is the winning of souls--evangelism. Nothing is more important than evangelism."*

*This means, based on the practice observed, that our only purpose is to baptize new believers. Is this really true? **It is absolutely not true.***

*As you read this article, you will observe that I believe that this narrow view has really threatened the very existence of the Adventist Church. It has poorly trained members to be only critical observers of society and not active participants.*

*It has facilitated feelings of pride and arrogance among many members. It has turned off progressive individuals and pushed away the critical thinkers. If the only purpose of the Adventist Church is to baptize individuals, who will be the ones to baptized others if we do not "keep" those that were baptized? What message would the newly baptized persons have to give to others about living for Jesus if all they are doing is baptizing?*

*Read with an open mind.*

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 a retired (transitioned) ordained minister of the Adventist Church for over 41 years and a mental health professional for almost 24 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 truly be the full or only purpose of our church? Bear in mind that

language or rhetoric used actually impacts our behavior, even when what is actually said is not what is intended.

I have heard over and over that the only reason for our existence is to "win souls" or to "baptize." 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. Therefore, we should not only give awards to pastors or lay evangelists for the amount baptized, but also for the number of new converts who stayed over one year.

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! My view is that keeping comes first, then winning. The nurturing agents of love, care and understanding are the most powerful tools for winning and keeping. It is not preaching. We also say that if you want more sheep then feed the 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 conduct 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 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."

In the Bahamas, many say that there is poor customer service in many of the service institutions. Poor customer service includes but not limited to, the attitude and behavior, of the one serving, the length of time to be served, the treatment of customers, the unnecessary red tape to go through, etc. Would we say the same about the Adventist Church? If evangelism is the "store," what are we doing to keep the "customers" (the potential and new members) coming back and deciding to make that institution their main place for "service?"

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. How do we do that? Here is one way. Often a church leader will ask all church departments or Sabbath School Units/Classes to set a baptism goal for the year. The leader asks each unit to develop plans to attain the goal. At the end of the year, the leader asks for a report of the number of those baptized. The unit with the highest baptisms will get an award.

Here is the problem. There is no assignment for the unit to have a goal of retention (keeping). At the end of the year there is no report of how many are still in the church. There is no award to a unit for the highest number remained in the church. Therefore, there is really no strategy to keep. It is only to get.

I am postulating that if we truly focus on nurture--keeping of souls--we will have more winning of souls. If we focus on winning 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 “winning 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.” Truthfully, there are some churches or church leaders with no "Keeping" or "winning" strategies. Their churches are spiritually and emotionally stagnant.

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. How often do we have nurturing or keeping 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 away members. There is an assumption that if there is no actual organized public evangelistic series, it means that the church has not evangelism plan. This is not necessarily true. In several of the churches I pastored, I would not have any public evangelistic series for the entire year, but still baptize more than twenty persons. Why? I focused on "keeping/winning" and not on "winning/winning"

The concept of "evangelism only" has caused us to ignore or brush aside the depressed, those with suicidal ideations, victims of child abuse, struggling single parents, abused spouses, the wounded homosexuals/lesbians, children who are academically struggling in school, the unemployed, the autistic children, parents with developmentally disabled children, the socially or academically illiterate, etc. What is evangelism if it does not help these persons?

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 "winning" 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 traditionally, evangelists should not be church pastors? Is it fair to say that traditionally, evangelists create numerical growth and not necessarily spiritual growth of the church?

**Traditionally, how do we "win" souls?** It has been my observation that for some the winning of souls include these and more:

1. Frightening the people to get them to the altar. Hitting them over their heads with the "truth." Saying to them "You are going to hell if you do not come to Jesus now, now, now! Come! Come! Come!"
2. Assuming that all those who have on jewelry or obvious make up are not born-again believers. Thus, targeting them during an appeal.
3. Telling the people that they will no longer want to sin if they come to Jesus (False hope).
4. Instructing them on what we believe and not allowing them to think objectively and clearly.
5. Quickly squeeze them into the front door of the church but neglect to close the back door.

6. Making them feel good on the day of baptism and forget where they live after that.
7. Counting how many got in and neglecting to count how many stayed.
8. Shocking them with the messages of the Last Days Events," the "2300 Days Prophecy", "Seven Last Plagues", etc.
9. Putting them in a "New Believers" or Bible class, but when it is over, we still do not know much about the new believers.

**What are my views about the "keeping" of souls?** They are:

1. Making sure that our "invitation" to the visitor or person interested in becoming an Adventist Christian is for him/her to know Jesus first.
2. Inviting people to the altar through a loving call. No threats or intimidation. Avoid calling out people to respond publicly.
3. Helping them apply Christian teachings to practical, every-day living. This will include but not limited to, cooking, balancing between work and play, principles for selecting videos to watch, socializing in a healthy way, learning about emotional problems and development.
4. Using the pulpit to teach more than preach. Some Adventist or biblical doctrines or teachings are best taught than preached. They become scary when preached. For example: 2300 Days Prophecy, State of the Dead.
5. Reminding them that they will not be quizzed 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" (John 13:35).
6. Doing lots of praising and not shaming from the pulpit.
7. Meeting the needs--emotional as well and material--where practical.
8. Having a "spiritual guardian" to be a friend to each new believer for one year.
9. Responding to the social and emotional needs of individuals and families.
10. Treating and recognizing the divorced and single parents (spiritually) as those who are married or single without children.

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 judgment seat of Christ. It is neglecting to do the most important things that matters--keeping those we win to Christ. The next time you start preaching a sermon to your church members, remember

the end result is first keeping and not just winning. If it is just to give a report and to receive a reward, you will suffer in the long run.

Remember to preach and teach so they will stay. Staying is proof of the pudding. Staying is the evidence of true evangelism.

Is it reasonable for me to ask you to think about a passion for souls as an encompassing phrase--"keeping and winning?" Remember, **"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.

*I can honestly say that over my years of pastoral ministry, I have won as many, and in some cases, more persons to Christ with far less evangelistic meetings when compared to the average pastor. Why? Because I focused on keeping first. Also, I have observed that when we focus on winning, 50 to 75 percent of those baptized leave the church within six months to two years. Some never come back after the baptism. I am not saying that none of the converts I baptized never left the church, but I am saying that at the end of each year it was my goal to **know** who was missing. Sadly, many leaders are not even aware who is missing or staying. I can also say that a high percentage stayed because of the approach I had--those we keep will win others. Praise God!*

*Dear readers, never forget this point. The nurturing agents of love, care and understanding are the most powerful tools for winning and keeping. It is not preaching.*

*For heaven's sake, we do need more evangelism—keeping and winning.*