

Preventing Secular Drift

How to Keep the Faith in a Secularized Age

Jon Paulien

Secular drift threatens all Adventist university students and professionals. It often seems irresistible. By secular drift I mean the gradual process of spiritual decline from active participation in Christianity to indifference or total rejection. When one begins to drift toward a secular way of life, the first indication is normally found in the personal prayer life. Many who once had a rich and deeply meaningful prayer life no longer do.

A related sign of secular drift is the absence of meaningful study of the Bible and other devotional classics such as the writings of Ellen White. For some, interest in this type of reading can vanish along with their prayer life. Others may continue to read, study, and discuss religion while not having prayed devotionally in years.

A third sign of a drift away from spiritual life is a decline in personal standards. If a person firmly believes that a certain action is wrong and that belief begins to falter at the practical level, this can be a sign of serious spiritual distress.

At the fourth stage secular drift becomes noticeable to others—church attendance begins to slip. Maybe at first the person sleeps in now and then, or an occasional weekend in the woods beckons. He or she "visits around" more often than not. Finally attendance is so rare it requires more effort than it seems worth.

The latter stages of secular drift are characterized by serious doubts about the Bible and the afterlife. The final stage in the drift toward secularization involves a serious distrust of any institution related to religion. Today disrespect for religious authority is as

much a "right-wing" as a "left-wing" problem in the Adventist Church.

While in a general sense the above pattern progresses gradually, in individual cases a personal crisis may accelerate the process or even reverse the order in which drift usually occurs. Of greater concern than the order of progression is the fact that increasing numbers of Adventists all over the world are struggling with secular drift.

If secularization is affecting us, what can we do to limit the damage and to help keep faith vigorous in a secular age? Secular drift is accelerated by a number of outside forces such as the media, particularly television, and the advertising blitz. Higher education and greater access to information may also contribute to increasing levels of secularization. But a secular perspective can infiltrate our lives only if a daily walk with God is no longer a reality. No outside force alone can secularize a person or a church.

The Devotional Life

The key to keeping the faith in a secular age, therefore, lies in learning how to develop and maintain a living relationship with God. Certainly no strong spiritual life can be maintained without an equally strong devotional habit. There is no substitute for spending a significant period of time every day in communion with God through study and prayer. Just as our bodies cannot survive meaningfully on one meal a week, so we cannot survive spiritually without a meaningful and regular devotional life.

Adventists are busy people. Our lives revolve around study or work, the church, and family to the point

where most of us have hardly a moment left for God or even ourselves. At various times I have found myself slipping into a secular drift. I'd like to share some techniques that have helped me to resume my walk with God. While these may not work equally well for everyone, they may provide a springboard from which you can find your own way.

Devotional Reading. For starters, the selection of reading matter is of great importance. Many materials, even in the Bible (like *Chronicles* or *Leviticus*) or the writings of Ellen White (like *Counsels on Diet and Foods* or *Medical Ministry*) were not designed for devotional reading. Reading matter should generally focus on Jesus, although for those in a totally secular environment, the chapters on Joseph and Daniel in the books *Patriarchs and Prophets* and *Prophets and Kings* are particularly relevant. It doesn't matter if you complete 20 pages, or just a sentence—what matters is listening for the voice of God as it speaks to you.

It can be helpful to keep a couple of spiritual notebooks for this portion of your devotionals. One can be used to record insights gained in devotional reading. Meaningful observations tend to be quickly forgotten if not written down. A second notebook can function as a spiritual diary. If we neglect to take stock of our lives, without realizing it we can easily drift into attitudes and behavior that are inconsistent with our religious profession. Over time such reflective activity can help us see evidence of God's guiding hand.

Communicating with God. Prayer is the most problematic

area in most people's devotional experience. Prayer is not so much performing a duty as learning how to communicate with a Person. But learning how to communicate is not easy, as any married couple can testify. What matters most in prayer, therefore, is not any set position or fixed pattern of words, but rather an effective communication with a person. If your mind wanders when you close your eyes, focus on a pattern in a bedspread or couch, or on a picture of Jesus. The discipline of sitting down and writing out what is really on your heart can also help to focus your mind. What counts in prayer is to communicate your deepest thoughts, the things that matter most to you, the feelings you could not express even to your best friend or spouse.

Perhaps even more important, let God answer your prayer. Many of our devotional prayers are like a quick phone call. We rush through a hasty collection of standard phrases, then hit the ground running the instant we say "Amen." That is like hanging up the phone on God.

Try this sometime. Get a pad and a pencil. After you finish praying, stay on your knees and wait. Write down whatever comes to your mind in the next few minutes. I realize that many Adventists are leery of impressions, but these perceptions are not always from the devil. The living God wants to guide us too. The Bible doesn't tell us what job to take, what person to marry, or what tasks to perform in a given day, yet God does have a plan for each of us. Test any impressions by the Scriptures. If they are compatible, experiment with your impressions, test them out. You can

gradually learn to recognize God's voice amid conflicting impressions.

In the early church, the people who made a difference were those who talked to God and knew Him. There is no better safeguard against secular drift than a living, daily relationship with God. Those who do not maintain such a relationship have little evidence that God exists and is relevant to their lives. God is pleased to reveal Himself to those who care enough to seek Him with all their hearts.¹

The Practice of Faith

As central as devotional life is to Christian experience, it quickly becomes boring unless it relates to the activities of everyday living. No relationship can survive for long if unaccompanied by action. Even psychologists say that people who want to maintain their faith in a secular world need to have a seven-day-a-week religion. What we believe intellectually may have little impact on how we live. It is quite possible for human beings to maintain behaviors that contradict their belief systems. In fact, nearly all Americans say they believe in God, but less than a third par-

ticipate regularly in some form of worship experience.

On the other hand, how we live has a powerful impact on what we believe. Seventh-day Adventists have been telling the world for more than a century that only through practicing Scripture can a person, in the truest sense, walk with God. Psychology is now confirming that. For example, the simple act of smiling at people can change your whole outlook. (Try it!)

Adventist Lifestyle. The idea that how we act affects what we believe is not new to Adventists. It forms the basis of Ellen White's philosophy of "mind cure."²

It is a law of nature that our thoughts and feelings are encouraged and strengthened as we give them utterance. While words express thoughts, it is also true that thoughts follow words. If we would give more expression to our faith, rejoice more in the blessings that we know we have—the great mercy and love of God—we should have more faith and greater joy.³

The essence of this chapter could be summarized as "talk faith and you will have faith." That, of course, is the genius of Seventh-

day Adventist Christianity. Living the Adventist lifestyle brings God into every moment of every day, whether one is shopping, studying for an exam, or making out a family budget. A seven-day-a-week religion will cause us to see in every detail of life something that leads us to think of Christ and His plan for us. That's an ideal antidote to secular drift. If everything relates to your faith, you

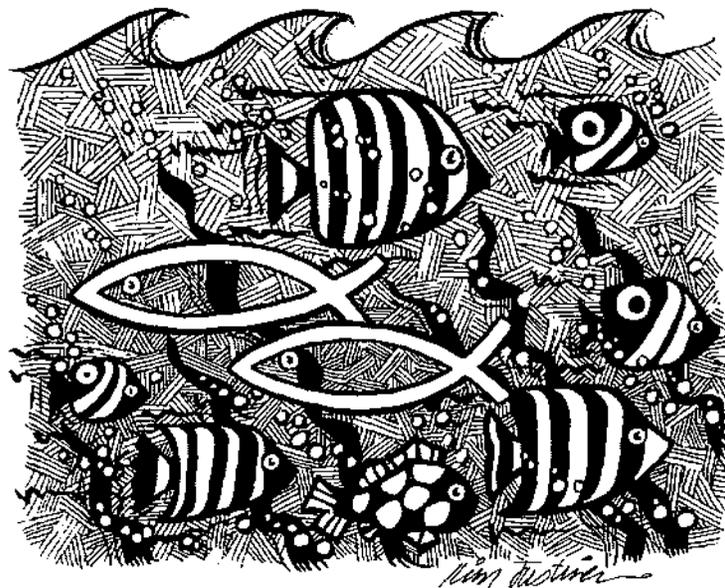


Illustration: Kim Justlmon

will be unlikely to drift away from it.

One way to relate faith to life is to talk regularly about your faith. "Talk faith and you will have faith" may sound like self-manipulation. But our belief systems are powerfully influenced by the way we live. In our everyday lives we are expected to perform many tasks that, while not necessarily evil in and of themselves, have the potential for draining away our faith. We must recognize this fact and seek to build habits and activities into our lives that make us conscious of God's presence. This will keep our faith strong.

Sharing the Faith. The one activity with the greatest potential for strengthening faith is sharing it with others. Such countercultural activities as saying grace in a restaurant or responding to an altar call establish our faith in creative and decisive contrast to the opinions of others. As we tell other people what God has done for us, as we worship together and praise God, our faith grows and is strengthened.

Why, then, don't we share our faith more often? I believe one reason is that many of us have had others witness to us and we didn't like it. Individuals with more zeal than courtesy often affront us with unwanted views. Why should I go abuse someone else when I don't like to be abused? The Golden Rule says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

I have good news! Zealous discourtesy is not God's model of witnessing:

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me."⁴

Effective and morally acceptable witness begins with two steps. First, it gives people time to get comfortable with you. You don't

put people at ease by telling them what to do or by talking down to them ("I have the truth—you don't"). On the other hand, people respond positively to those who listen and don't put them down.

The second step in effective witness is being the kind of person that others would like to be—the kind of a person who attracts rather than repels. Secular people are looking for something better. But only when you have gained their confidence will they have a context for understanding your call to "follow Jesus."

As a witness Jesus was a magnet, not a hammer. We too can learn how to become magnets. Out of a living relationship with God flows power and energy that can help us to become more kind and attractive Christians. Such power and energy will help us to keep the faith in a secularized age.

NOTES

1. An excellent book on devotions for people who live and work in a secular environment is *Too Busy Not to Pray*, by Bill Hybels (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).
2. *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 240-260.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-253.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

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Letters

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the Fall, then Eden restored. Imperfect though the characters were, they were still God's people, and that's what the author of the book wanted readers to center on—not the book's troublesome dating behaviors or marriage practices.

Denying the use of literary analysis tools to elucidate the text would be analogous to denying a botanist the use of a microscope to reveal a plant's structure!

Wilma McClarty, Southern College
Collegedale, Tennessee, U.S.A.

Impressed

I was particularly impressed with the excellent presentation of the first issues of *DIALOGUE*, the lucidity of most of the articles, and the dexterous manner in which intellectual topics are approached from a spiritual perspective. I recommend that in future issues you include articles on astronomy, a field that is rapidly expanding and that intrigues many Bible-believing Christians.

Coster Ncube, Univ. of Zimbabwe
Harare, ZIMBABWE

Provides Answers

Having read a copy of the French edition of *DIALOGUE*, I want to express my appreciation for this new publication. It offers needed support to Adventists who are pursuing university studies and provides answers to many of the questions they face. I suggest that in the future you approach the subject of the Christian and politics.

Adelio Pellegrini
Rome, ITALY

Deal with Ethical Issues

I appreciated your comprehensive piece on "Adventist Global Strategy" and your delineation of our church's objective to reach two billion unreached individuals. In that same issue I thoroughly enjoyed the profile on Rut Alonso Cardona—a professional sibling I'd like to meet since my family also has roots in the Basque Country of Spain.

Adventist students attending public colleges and universities in the Sacramento area really appreciate *DIALOGUE*, although I'm afraid that since the collegiate fellowship has grown to 365 many are not yet in your list. Some of us are very interested in bioethics as well as in business and professional ethics. At a time when Christians are being strongly influenced by secular values, it would be useful to deal again with these issues in *DIALOGUE*.

Michael Angelo Saucedo, Office of
the Attorney General
Davis, California, U.S.A.

Resist Any Pressure to Change

I recently received the first two issues of *DIALOGUE* and wish to thank whoever put my name on the mailing list. I heartily applaud the church's efforts to serve our too-long-neglected segment of the membership.

Although I am skeptical that the present format of allowing for a variety of views will be permitted to continue once news of *DIALOGUE*'s existence becomes general knowledge, I urge the AMiCUS Committee to resist any pressure to change. We in secular academia value the critical thinking which is only possible by conducting honest and open evaluation from these various perspectives.

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