

The Jonah Syndrome

Bruce Campbell Moyer

The Lord sent this message to Jonah, the son of Amital: "Go to the great city of Nineveh, and give them this announcement from the Lord. . . ." But Jonah was afraid to go and ran away. . . . Then the Lord spoke to Jonah again. . . . So Jonah obeyed, and went to Nineveh.¹

Say what we may about Jonah's motivation, we cannot deny the effectiveness of his preaching. At the end of 40 days of rather negative preaching, every person and animal in the city is in sackcloth and ashes.² As the citizens and animals of Nineveh repent, God is delighted, the people are happy, and Jonah is chagrined. He is embarrassed. His perception of God is shattered, his professional reputation is ruined. He is placed in the untenable situation of having to love the unlovable who have now become loving, or at least affectionate.

Jonah moves outside the city, hoping that God may yet repent of his goodness. When nothing happens, Jonah wallows in self-pity. His distaste for these people is so great that he cannot be happy with their salvation. In fact, he is angry with God. "You let me down, Lord, now let me die," he grumbles.

Some time back an urban congregation invited me to talk with them about church growth and how to reach out to the surrounding community. It was a situation, common in cities, where the community changes around the church and the members, most of whom had moved away, still commute in to the church. How could they become a "community" church?

I asked them to tell me who lived in the neighborhood. They described a mixed crowd of recent immigrants and assorted motorcycle clubs. It was a colorful

neighborhood with a flourishing drug trade. How does a church grow in this type of environment? What, if anything, do Seventh-day Adventists have to say or to offer to these people? How can we best offer it?

I asked the church members if they really wanted their neighbors coming to church. Immigrant families are poor, have lots of children, and contribute little in monetary terms. Motorcycle people wear leather, and don't take many baths. The only people with money to put in the offering plate were drug pushers. Did they really want to sit and worship in the same pews with these people? Could they sing together, "What a fellowship, what a joy divine. . . ."? Or, "Blest be the tie that binds"?

As they reflected on the realities around them, they decided, unfortunately, that they really didn't want these people worshiping with them, and would look elsewhere for growth possibilities. Effective evangelism and lasting conversion requires fellowship and relationship. The church could have played a valuable role, but it was located in a "throwaway" neighborhood.

Jonah lives! Many of us still do not like cities. We do not trust cities. And more often than not, we are not very sure about pastors and laypeople who enjoy working in the cities.

Who is going to love those motorcycle clubs? How are they ever going to hear the gospel if nobody loves them? Are they "throwaway" people, just as Jonah considered Nineveh a "throwaway" city? A "throwaway" city or neighborhood is one where we can isolate all the undesirable people and their activities, such as drug pushers, prostitutes, the homeless,

and other unregenerates. Then the rest of the city or country can get on with the more pleasant business of life, uncontaminated.

We read about the homeless children in our cities and we are concerned. We ought to tremble. They are going to grow up to be part of the growing problem. My wife recently asked me to go to a nearby urban shopping center for her, because some folk had told her it was unsafe for women and children. Is this happening, at least partly because we have considered it safe to live and work in the suburbs, outside the central city and its problems? What is our responsibility to the cities?

Jonah saw Nineveh as the enemy. This attitude always puts the relationship in a "we" and "they" mode.

We are the good guys. We wear white hats, think nice thoughts, eat good things, and are sure that God is very fortunate to have nice friends like us.

They are the bad guys. They wear black hats, think evil thoughts, eat detestable things, and never say their prayers.

It is very easy to love "we". It is extremely difficult to love "them". And as long as we view non-Adventists—and especially non-Christians—as "they," we will not love them.

Let me suggest that Jonah operated from a "church" mentality rather than a "kingdom" mentality:

- A church mentality focuses on the organizational needs of a church. A kingdom mentality focuses on the full extent of the Kingdom of God—all of God's activities in this world.
- A church mentality fragments God's work into isolated parts. A kingdom mentality under-

stands each particular part of society in its relation to the whole.

- A church mentality works to get people into the church. A kingdom mentality works to insert the church into the world.
- A church mentality worries about the world contaminating the church. A kingdom mentality is anxious to see the church transform the world.³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, once remarked that the more exclusively we acknowledge and confess Christ as our Lord, the more fully the wide range of his kingdom will be revealed to us.

Some final questions in the spirit of Jonah's unfinished book which ends with a question mark:

1. Quite honestly, do I dislike the world, fear the world or love the world?
2. How does my attitude toward the world affect my ministry?
3. Does my attitude toward the world enable me to mix easily, lovingly and redemptively with the people of the world, or does it keep me isolated from them?
4. Is the book of Jonah really ancient history or is it present reality and still an open question?

NOTES

1. Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1, 2, *The Living Bible, Paraphrased*. Used by permission (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971).
2. See Jonah 3:8, NIV.
3. See Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downer's Grove IL:

InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 11.

Bruce C. Moyer (Ph.D., San Francisco Theological Seminary) is currently director of the Center for Global Urban Mission in Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A.

When the Right One . . .

Continued from page 15

problems or disagreements. It is unfair to assume that people disagree only because they do not understand each other. Couples who have learned to understand each other still find areas of disagreement; but it is simply easier for them to cope.

After gaining at least some understanding of each other quite well, a couple then can move on to resolving a host of other difficulties that come up in their daily lives. Misunderstandings and tensions in their sexual experiences, disagreements over finances, difficulties in dealing with each partner's family, and methods about decision making are less threatening and more manageable to the marriage.

God knew what he was doing when, in Eden, he established the family as the basic unit of society. Christians who follow his guidance in choosing their life's companion and in preparing for marriage can look forward to an enjoyable and lasting family life.

NOTES

1. One popular six-session premarriage education course is *Together-ness, Oneness, Joy. Caring for Marriage* was designed by Ron and Karen

Flowers. It is available from church world headquarters and in several languages from division offices. *Marriage Commitment* is the widely used program written by John and Millie Youngberg of Andrews University. For inquiries about these programs write to the General Conference Family Life Office or to Dr. John Youngberg, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104, U.S.A.

2. The popular *Temperament Inventory* by Cruise and Blitchington is available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and French through Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, MI 49104, U.S.A. For information concerning the *Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis* write Psychological Publications, Inc., 5300 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027. The T-JTA is also available in several languages.

RESOURCES

Christian bookstores in many parts of the world display books, journals, articles, tapes, and video cassettes that teach communication skills, conflict-resolving skills, concepts about parenting, money management, Christian understandings about sexuality, and other useful areas of family and marriage. Bibliographies are available from the Family Life Office, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600.

Delmer and Betty Holbrook, founders of the Home and Family Office, have conducted marriage and family seminars around the world.

Pontius' Puddle

© Joel Kauffman

