

## Problems

*Any church that is not seriously involved  
in helping fulfill the Great Commission  
has forfeited its biblical right to exist.*

—Oswald J. Smith

*“Go into all the world and preach  
the gospel to all creation.”*

—Jesus, Mark 16:15

*Every Christian . . . is either  
a missionary or an impostor.*

—Charles Spurgeon



*Chapter 1*

## **Are We Just Talking to Ourselves?**

*1 Corinthians 9:19–23*

**M**y brothers didn't think I could survive an hour of aerobics. I knew *they* couldn't. So a friendly wager was on. We were on a cruise ship with some midnight buffets in the belly to burn off. So I ventured onto the gym floor and tried to mimic the moves of the instructor. Since I have the rhythm of an irregular heartbeat, I found it most challenging. But because my brothers were behind me, I kept kicking. An hour later, my brothers looked like they were going to a banquet. "Didn't you think the aerobics were hard?" I asked.

"Actually," my brother confessed, "we started, but we figured that if we looked half as dumb as you did, we wanted nothing to do with it. So we dropped out."

The only reason I persisted in my perspiring was because I assumed my brothers were behind me. Come to find out, I was exercising alone.

Do you suppose this is a parable of the church? We work hard and sweat through a tornado of the religious activities. We're frantically busy with our schools and clinics and summer camps and prayer meetings—but are we just talking to ourselves?

Shortly before moving to pastor the Walla Walla College Church, I was working on a master of business administration degree at a local university. One evening a classmate cornered me and said, "I hear you're moving to Walla Walla."

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“Yes!” I said. “You’ve heard of it?”

“I used to live there—actually in a suburb of Walla Walla.”

“Really? I didn’t know Walla Walla was big enough to have its own suburb.”

“We lived in College Place in a cul-de-sac with all Adventists.”

“Adventists?” I asked, fearful of what was coming.

“Yeah, I think it’s a religion or something. The only thing I know about them is that they don’t do garage sales on Saturday. Isn’t that weird?”

I smiled and nodded.

Then she asked, “So why are you moving there?”

“It’s a job transfer,” I said, hoping to cut the conversation.

“What kind of job do you do?”

“Well,” I said, “I’m an Adventist pastor.”

“Really? You’re a pastor? You seem so . . . normal!”

That conversation still taunts me. How is it that a woman could live for years in a neighborhood comprised exclusively of Seventh-day Adventists and the only thing she knows about us is that we don’t do garage sales on Saturday? It makes me wonder: Are we just talking to ourselves?

The apostle Paul wrestled with this question. Listen to his heart for people who were far from God:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19–24).

Early in my ministry, this passage kept me awake at night. It occurred to me that I didn’t have any real friends outside of the church. I ate with Adventists. I worshiped with Adventists. I played with Adventists. I worked with Adventists. All of my friends were Adventists.

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So I began to pray, “God, if You want me to witness to lost people, where would I even begin?” That’s when I had an epiphany. *Oh, I know where lost people hang out! The bowling alley!*

So I joined The Lousy Bowlers League—that seemed about my speed. Of course, no one on our team was as lousy as me. It didn’t matter since I was only there to build relationships with people far from God.

Now, I don’t mean for this to be judgmental, but it seemed as though everyone on our team was “lost.” They cussed like lost people (mostly at me). They drank like lost people. They smoked like lost people. They told dirty jokes like lost people. I can’t lie—the jokes were funny. Really funny. Inappropriate to repeat, but gut-hurting hilarious. I’d laugh. Then I’d feel guilty. Then I’d confess my sin but crack up all over again when the jokes came to mind. It got messy.

I would get home past midnight, reeking of smoke, reeling from the lunacy of it all. I would pray, “God, what is the point? Nobody is interested. Besides, You and I both know that bowling is not my spiritual gift.”

In that den of doubt, it felt as though God was saying, “Karl, when you are in that bowling alley with a heart to befriend people that do not know Me, it is in that place where you are most squarely in the sweet spot of My will.”

I wish the end of my story mirrored that of a typical Adventist evangelist. You know how the story is supposed to end: “So I baptized everyone on the team. Then I baptized all the other teams in the league. Then I baptized all the other leagues and we transformed the bowling alley into a megachurch. Oh, and the last person I baptized was the manager of the bowling alley whom you know today as Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

That’s how it’s *supposed* to end. The truth is, my bowling evangelism rendered one pseudospiritual conversation. A buddy told me he was going through a divorce. I suggested that he attend a meeting in my church called Lost Relationships Support Group. I offered to take him. He agreed, but a couple hours before I was to pick him up he called and flaked, saying something about not being “a church guy.”

So that’s the closest I would ever come to influencing my team for Jesus. Pitiful, huh?

I understand why many churches settle in after a while with the unpublished mission statement that says, “We just want to talk to ourselves.”

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It is so much easier to play church and let our spiritual busyness pass for doing the mission Jesus gave us.

Jesus felt so passionate about this mission that one time He shared the same story, back to back to back in rapid-fire succession, to hammer home one point: Lost people matter to God.

Do you remember the stories? A shepherd had one hundred sheep. One went AWOL, but that sheep mattered to the shepherd. So he left the ninety-nine in peril to search for the one. When he found that missing sheep, he invited his friends and neighbors to a party. Then they celebrated because the lost sheep was found!

A woman had ten coins. She lost one of them. But the coin mattered to her so she launched an all-out search. When she found that coin, she invited her friends and neighbors to a party. And they celebrated because the lost coin was found!

A man had two sons. The younger one demanded his inheritance early and then squandered it. I don't have to tell you that the kid mattered to the dad. So every day the father waited, hoping his boy would find his way back home. When the lost son finally returned, the father pulled out all the stops and threw a party unlike anything the town had ever seen. And they celebrated because the lost son was found!

Taking a page out of Jesus' lesson plans, let's wrap up this chapter with three similar stories that remind us of God's number one priority—lost people.

### **Story one**

Rachel and I met in a public-speaking class while getting our MBA degrees. Our first assignment was to meet someone new.

I swiveled to my left. "Hi, I'm Karl."

"Rachel," she said. "I work at Boeing. I'm not married, but I have a cat." She handed me a business card that listed an alphabet after her name—CPA, CFSA, and so on.

So began a friendship that continues to this day.

One night after class, she said abruptly, "You're a pastor, right?"

"Yes."

"So do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Could you tell me about God?"

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My pulse doubled. I knew that eternity was hanging in the balance. Then I shared a simple gospel presentation and finished by saying, “We’d love to have you come visit our church some week.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

Several months later, I glanced down from the pulpit to see Rachel and her boyfriend, Rick. After the service, I raced to the lobby to greet them.

“It’s so good to see you!” I said.

“Well, we came Sunday morning,” she said, “but nobody was here. You didn’t tell me you meet on Saturdays.” (I’ve never been big on details!)

“Sorry,” I said, “but I’m so glad you found us.”

Then she flashed some bling on her finger and said, “Guess what? Rick and I are getting married! I’m so disappointed because you’re the only clergy guy I know, so I wanted you to do the service. But the ceremony is on Saturday. So far as I can tell, that’s the only day you work.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I said. “I’ll be there. But hey, come back to church next week.”

“Yeah, maybe we will. It wasn’t as weird as I thought it would be.”

The next Friday I noticed the church lawn had not been mowed. I called the deacon who told me the riding mower was broken and he would try to get at it the following week. Normally, that wouldn’t have bothered me, but all I could think about was Rachel and Rick. What message would that send if the grounds were a wreck? You see, it’s one thing to send out a mass mailing to faceless names and invite them to a prophecy seminar at church. It is different when we’re trying to introduce our friends and family members to Jesus. We do church differently. Suddenly, it becomes personal.

I said to the deacon, “I have a couple friends that may visit our church tomorrow so we have to mow the lawn.”

“But, Pastor, it’s five acres.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “Get some scissors. I’ll help you.”

So we mowed the lawn. Rick and Rachel showed up the next day.

For the next two years, they faithfully participated in our church. Then they attended a series of meetings hosted by Lonnie Melashenko, long-time speaker and director for *Voice of Prophecy*, the religious radio broadcast. One evening, I asked Rachel if she wanted to meet Lonnie. “Absolutely!” she said.

As we approached Elder Melashenko, Rachel raced ahead and said,

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“Your hair is always so perfect. I just want to mess it up.” With that, she lunged forward and swirled his impeccably coifed hair until he looked like Einstein. Lonnie stood in shock. Standing behind Rachel, I tried to gesture that I was trying to lead her to Christ.

Evangelism can get messy. Lonnie was a great sport, and we still laugh about it. During those meetings, we visited Rachel and Rick and asked them, “Have you ever thought about being baptized?”

They replied in perfect stereo, “We thought you’d never ask! We want to be baptized this Sabbath.”

Standing in the baptistry with Rick and Rachel remains one of the most cherished memories of my ministry. In that moment, all of heaven erupted in a party because two of God’s kids came home.

### **Story two**

Fernando and Gail were derelicts of sorts. Fernando didn’t have a job. Gail worked in the back of a sweatshop sewing motorcycle jackets.

As they tell their story, one day Fernando happened into the back of that shop. Not being one to waste words, Fernando said, “I find myself irresistibly attracted to you. What do you say we live together?”

Gail agreed, and things were going along fine until early one morning Gail said, “I think we should start going to church.”

“Church?” Fernando asked.

“Yes.”

“But we aren’t church people!”

“I know,” Gail said, “but I think that is what is missing in our lives.”

They argued about it until finally they struck a bargain: Fernando would go to church with Gail if she would let him go back to sleep.

“Deal!” Gail was thrilled.

Scanning the Yellow Pages, Gail noticed a church with a funny name, Seventh-day Adventist. That got her wondering if “Seventh-day” meant they worshiped on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. She called. Sure enough, there’s a church that meets on Saturday, not Sunday. This meant they could get to church a day earlier. Fernando was game for whatever day.

The next Saturday, Fernando and Gail steered their Harleys into the parking lot of a small Seventh-day Adventist church. “Welcome!” an elderly woman said. In her fifty-plus years of greeting folk at that church,

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she'd never seen anything like these bikers. She asked the obvious: "Are you visiting?"

"Yes," Gail said.

"Perfect! We have a class just for you. I think you'll like the teacher. His name is Brother Bill."

Ushering them into the sanctuary, Fernando and Gail slipped into the back pew as Brother Bill began. "Good morning. Welcome, glad you're here. Now, before we jump into the Sabbath School lesson, I wonder if anybody has a question?"

Fernando's hand shot up. "Yeah, I got a question. How come God kills little babies?"

"Um . . . well . . . yes! Great question," Brother Bill said. He then presented an impromptu Bible study on why there is evil in the world if God is supposed to be good.

When he finished sharing his answer, Brother Bill glanced at Fernando and asked, "Does that help?"

"Yes, thank you," Fernando said.

They attended that little Bible study week after week until Gail suggested they stay for church. "Sure," Fernando said. "I like them folk."

As fate would have it, they chose to stay the one week out of the year that the pastor preached on stewardship. That was the annual sermon where he let the saints have it! "The reason so many of you don't know God's blessings in your life is because you don't tithe. How can you expect God to bless if you are stealing from Him?" By the end of the sermon, the pastor's shirt was soaked in sweat.

Later that week, Gail said to Fernando, "I think we ought to pay tithe."

"On what?" Fernando said. "In order to pay tithe you need an income."

"I know," Gail said. "I make a little money at the sweatshop."

While Fernando wasn't keen on the idea, he couldn't control Gail. He could, however, make a scene and let God know He'd better keep His end of the bargain. So the following Sabbath, when the offering plate came by, Fernando stood up and held the tithe envelope heavenward. Shaking it with jerky jabs, he yelled, "OK God, now do Your stuff." All this drama in the divine hour!

Next week, no blessings. "See," Fernando said, "I told you it doesn't work."

Gail said, "We have to be patient."

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The next week in church, Fernando repeated his demands. Shouting over the grandma butchering an offertory on the piano, Fernando stood and told God to do His stuff. Then he plunked the envelope into the plate and waited for God to RSVP.

But that next week, no blessings. This happened week after week, until Fernando was done. “It doesn’t work,” he said.

Gail said, “Maybe you ought to pay tithe on your little business.”

“Fine,” Fernando bargained. “This week we will tithe on anything I make as well. But if we don’t get blessed the next week, we never tithe again. Deal?”

“Deal.”

The next Sabbath they returned a portion of two incomes and, wouldn’t you know it, the following week Fernando’s little business doubled. And the next week his business doubled again. And again. And again.

For thirteen weeks in a row his business grew exponentially, doubling week after week, until Fernando became one of the most lucrative marijuana dealers in all of Southern California!

They set up an appointment to talk to the pastor. “We decided to start doing that tithe thing you preached about,” they said, “and God has been blessing our socks off. Week after week, Fernando’s business has been doubling—almost to the exact penny.”

“Praise the Lord,” the pastor said. “What kind of business is it?”

“Well . . . it’s in agriculture.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Gail said. “Fernando sells pot.”

“Oh, um, well . . . OK.” The pastor tried to stay composed.

“Hey, we know this is not right,” they continued. “We’re wondering if you’d marry us. And baptize us. And help us move away from here so we can start all over again and really live like Seventh-day Adventist Christians.”

The pastor, of course, was thrilled to help. He baptized them, married them, and helped pack up their few possessions and relocate to another state.

Last I heard, Fernando and Gail were youth leaders in their local Adventist church. And all of heaven erupted in a party because two of God’s kids came home.

**Story three**

“Excuse me, Pastor.” The young woman tugged on my arm in the crowded church lobby. “I want to be baptized.”

“Praise the Lord,” I said. While her face looked familiar, I didn’t even attempt a name. “That’s wonderful. Um, I’m sorry, I should know you, but—”

“Oh, I’m Candie. I’ve been coming to your church, and I would like to become a Seventh-day Adventist.”

“Great! Let’s meet to make the arrangements.”

Later that week, I reviewed the basic doctrines of our church with her. I mentioned spiritual gifts. “For example,” I said, “one of my gifts is teaching, so I don’t mind talking in front of people.”

“I think that’s my gift too.”

“Really? Well then, um, would you be willing to share your story just before I baptize you on Sabbath?”

“I’d love to.”

I never thought to ask her about her story.

The next Sabbath morning, Candie stood in the baptistry and began her story. “I was a teenage prostitute and worked for twelve years as a stripper.”

I had never seen the members so attentive—certainly not during any of my sermons. My pulse doubled as I wondered where her story was going next.

“My dad disappeared before I can remember him. My mom was an alcoholic. My brother is in jail.”

Candie spared the sordid details but shared enough for everyone to get that she had a lot of brokenness and pain. She quickly jumped to the topic of “God’s mind-blowing, indescribable, amazing grace.” Indeed, her spiritual gift was public speaking.

“If God’s grace can cover me,” she said, “then there is no such thing in God’s vocabulary as an ineligible candidate. If God can change me, He can change anybody.”

With that, I lowered Candie into the water. Everybody in the church stood and applauded for what seemed like fifteen minutes.

In that holy moment it hit me with fresh force—the power of God to forgive and transform a sinner. Only God can change a prostitute into a promise-keeper. Only Christ can reconstruct the composition of a

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human heart. Only He can stoop into the shadows and salvage the brokenness of a spiritual casualty like Candie, Fernando, Gail, Rick, Rachel, you, and me.

At the potluck lunch, I noticed that Candie was gone. “Have you seen Candie?” I asked several people. My wife looked in the restroom. I searched in nearby classrooms. No Candie.

Then I saw her. At the baptistry, she sat alone in a cavernous sanctuary.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

“Oh, hi Pastor,” she said. “Yes, I’ve never been better.”

“What are you doing?”

“Well, I just wanted to watch the water go down the drain. I can promise you this tank will never again hold this much sin. You know, Pastor, you may not be able to relate to this, but for the first time in my life, I feel clean. I have never felt this way before. Isn’t God’s grace amazing?”

And all of heaven erupted in a party because God’s kid came home.