

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN PROPHECY-FOCUSED
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST EVANGELISM

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical Considerations in

Prophecy-focused Seventh-day Adventist Evangelism

Much has been said and written regarding the importance of sharing the “Adventist message.” In fact, it’s hard-wired into the DNA of Seventh-day Adventism, that we must share “Christ’s last message of mercy,” a distinctive end-time prophetic message, before it’s too late.¹ This missional focus has translated to the rapid growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church around the world.²

Despite this overall growth trend, Adventist methods of evangelism have changed little over the past 150 years. The use of these same historical practices in evangelism among culturally diverse people groups around the world has led to the rise of syncretistic practices and beliefs among both church members and leaders, ultimately challenging the long-term viability of mission.³

Americans today are increasingly less engaged in church, with striking declines in church affiliation, church attendance and spiritual practice over the past twenty years, particularly among younger generations.^{4 5} When it comes to Adventist church growth in America, we see equally disturbing trends, with overall growth slowing and older members making up a larger

¹Damsteegt, P. Gerard, "The Adventist Theologian, the Three Angels' Messages, and the Unity of the Church" (2006). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 72. 1. <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/church-history-pubs/72>.

²Trim, David J.B. “Adventist Church Growth and Mission Since 1863: An Historical–Statistical Analysis.” (2012). <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1209&context=jams>.

³Patricia, Gustin Jo. “Cross-Cultural Evangelism: The Challenge Facing Adventism Today.” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008). <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=jams>.

⁴“Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith.” Barna Group. (2020). Accessed September 14, 2020. <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

⁵Burge, Ryan P. “The Possible Decline of the Nones Isn't a Boost for Evangelicals.” *Christianity Today*. (March, 2020). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/march/nones-decline-generation-z-millennial-faith-research.html>.

percentage of membership. Looking closer, we notice that growth in America is happening at higher rates among ethnic minority groups, meaning overall growth among the majority culture is even lower.⁶ This is all despite the fact that the church continues to have a strong emphasis on sharing our faith through a traditional, prophecy-focused public evangelism model.⁷

While younger generations of Americans have increasingly disengaged from organized Christian religion, their concerns about ethical questions like honesty, truth, and justice are increasingly important, especially among digital natives in the emerging “Generation Z.”⁸ ⁹ It is easier than ever before to fact-check claims online, to uncover hypocrisy, and to call out phonies, fakes, and pretenders.

Problem and Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to find and evaluate these ethical concerns and suggest ways to improve the Adventist approach to evangelism. In this paper, I hope (a) to develop an ethical framework for evaluating motives and actions in the context of evangelism, (b) to identify factors and practices in traditional prophecy-focused evangelism which may be creating barriers to reaching digital natives within Western culture, primarily focusing on perceived or actual ethical concerns, and (c) to suggest ways in which these ethical concerns can be addressed,

⁶Kidder, S. Joseph. “Reflections on the Future of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in North America: Trends and Challenges (Part 1 of 2).” *Ministry Magazine* (December 2010). <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2010/12/reflections-on-the-future-of-north-american-seventh-day-adventism.html>.

⁷Hostetler, Ellen. “Churches Around the United States Join ACTS 20:21 Evangelism.” *Adventist Review Online*. (September 10, 2020). <https://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story15425-churches-around-the-united-states-join-acts-2021-evangelism>.

⁸Gibbons, Lane. "Ethical Branding." *Marriott Student Review* Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 , Article 23. (2020). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview/vol3/iss4/23>

⁹Francis, Tracy, and Fernanda Hoefel. “True Gen’: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies.” Last modified July 7, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies>.

avoided, or mitigated, with the goal of increasing the overall effectiveness of the work of sharing the Adventist message.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethics Background

The term “ethics” deals with what is right and wrong morally.¹⁰ While numerous ethical models exist, conservative Christian ethicists like Geisler espouse an absolutist, deontological framework of Christian ethics that is founded in Biblical principles.¹¹ Seventh-day Adventists, especially, emphasize the binding nature of God’s Ten-Commandment law on Christians¹², creating a clear moral and ethical framework that is grounded in God’s declarations from Mount Sinai.

Within the context of American culture, competing value systems and their corresponding ethical frameworks have shaped an increasingly fragmented and polarized political and social landscape. Thus it would be difficult or impossible to broadly categorize American culture within any on particular ethical framework or value system. Americans have traditionally valued liberty, freedom of expression, individualism, hard work, and the resulting material advantages that come from advanced societies. In addition, certain themes are emerging among the values of the younger generations. These include an increasing concern for social justice issues such as identifying and opposing abuse of power, fighting racial inequality, supporting women’s rights, fostering diversity, slowing climate change, and being open and inclusive towards the LGBTQ+

¹⁰Geisler, Norman L. Essay. In *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues & Options*, Second Edition, 15. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 19

¹²*Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual*, 168–169. Hagerstown, MD: Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016. Fundamental Belief Number 19: The Law of God

community.¹³ In practice, not all values are lived out consistently, even among those who embrace them.

While many of these societal values align in positive ways with Biblical and Christian values, others seem to conflict with Biblical principles. In addition, the expression of our values as Seventh-day Adventist Christians isn't always a consistent reflection of our stated beliefs and understanding. Hence, we have dichotomies of conflicting values, ethics, and practices, as illustrated in (Figure 1).

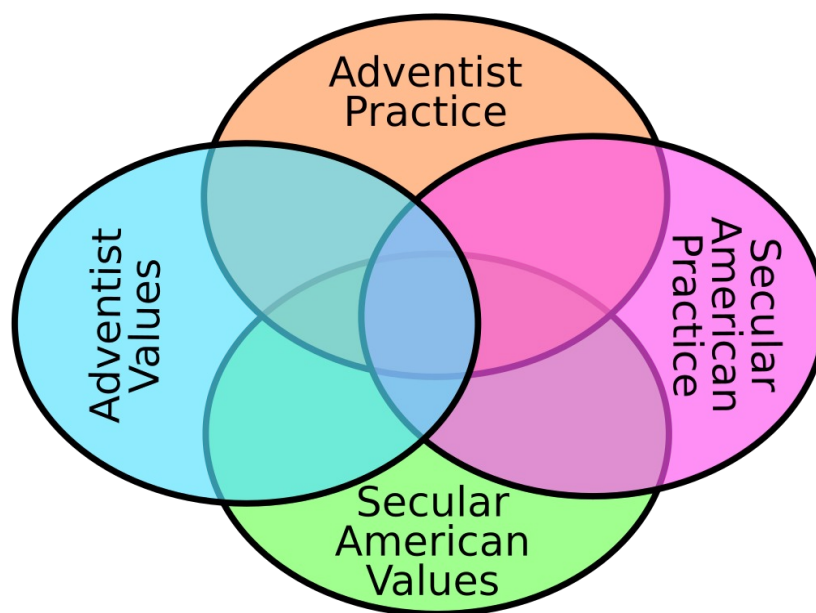


Figure 1

Certainly as Christians and as Seventh-day Adventists, our practice and values should align. Especially in areas where our values align with the values of prevailing culture, if our practice is out of alignment with our stated values, it nullifies the force of our message. No

¹³Kim Parker, Nikki Graf and Ruth Igielnik. "Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*. (January, 2019). Accessed September 14, 2020. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

longer can we hide our hypocrisy under a cloak of secrecy – a bit of Internet research is often all that is needed to uncover the scandal or betray the lie.

Perhaps the more challenging areas are those where our values differ widely from the values of the prevailing culture. One obvious example would be in affirmation of the LGBTQ+ lifestyle: while Biblical values teach us to affirm all people as children of God, the Bible also places an equally high value on the traditional model of marriage and family. The very fact that certain lifestyles and practices are called “sinful” can make the prevailing culture feel violated, as seems to go against the values of equality and inclusiveness.¹⁴

Many would question the ethical justification of the very practice of “evangelism” or proselytizing of any form.¹⁵ It has been argued that, considering the values of diversity and inclusiveness, the act of convincing another person to alter their religious beliefs is simply an abuse of power that violates the freedom of the less-powerful. Thiessen makes an excellent study of this question in his recent book, *The Scandal of Evangelism*, in which he argues for an ethical model of evangelism grounded in the Biblical mandate to love God and one’s neighbor.¹⁶

Another important ethical question regards the practice of proselytizing or “evangelizing” among Christians of other denominations—which has admittedly been the majority of “evangelism” that has been conducted by the Adventist church in this country. This is an important ethical discussion, which is has been addressed before,¹⁷ but which will be outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁴Moll, Rob. “The Bible as Canadian Hate Literature.” *Christianity Today*. (April, 2004). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/aprilweb-only/4-28-42.0.html>.

¹⁵Schneider, Nathan. “The Ethics of Proselytism.” (March, 2010). Accessed October 26, 2020. <https://tif.ssrc.org/2010/03/03/the-ethics-of-proselytism/>.

¹⁶Thiessen, Elmer John. *The Scandal of Evangelism: a Biblical Study of the Ethics of Evangelism*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.

¹⁷Anderson, Roy Allen. “Christian Ethics in Evangelism.” *Ministry Magazine* (November 1960): 4-7.

Ethical Framework

Any discussion of ethics requires an examination of our own values and morals. What do we actually believe to be right and wrong? What values are the most important, and why? Many professions have a “code of conduct” which guides the ethical decisions for those working in each profession. For Christian evangelists, though, there isn’t a single universally-accepted code of conduct—other than (we hope) faithfulness to the Bible. Several Christian organizations have attempted to create such a code of conduct, perhaps most prominently is a list prepared by a team of Evangelical leaders and published in 1985 in the *Cultic Studies Journal*.¹⁸ This list includes points about honoring God and His calling, respecting and valuing other people without discrimination, not using any force, coercion, or unethical persuasive mechanisms, avoiding self-dealing and corruption and dealing truthfully, openly and honestly.

For the sake of this discussion, I will assume that Seventh-day Adventism embraces a deontological ethical framework centered in God’s revelation of Himself, through His Word and His Ten-commandment law, but most importantly through the Person and Ministry of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

In this paper, we will focus on three specific ethical values and how they relate to our practice of evangelism. Among these ethical values, rooted in God’s revelation of Himself, none is more central than God’s love for all His creation, and His desire for His creatures to reciprocate that love towards Him others. In the context of evangelism, God’s love motivates us to tell others the “Good News” because of our love for the other person and desire for his or her

¹⁸“A Code of Ethics for the Christian Evangelist.” *Cultic Studies Journal*, 1985, Vol. 2, No. 2: 304-305. <https://www.spiritualabuseresources.com/articles/a-code-of-ethics-for-the-christian-evangelist>.

¹⁹Wilson, Ted N. C. “Ethics in a Challenging World.” *Adventist World* (March 2020).

salvation and a better life. That love for others supersedes all thought of self-interest—whether for my own personal gain, or even corporate self-interest such as “church growth.”

A second core attribute that springs from God’s character of love is the value of truth and honesty. Adventists place a strong emphasis on “the truth” as found in God’s Word. But more than just emphasizing “the truth” of the Bible, every action of our lives and especially our methods of evangelism must be characterized by truth-telling, openness and honesty, and free from all deception.

Finally, we will focus on the value of liberty and human dignity—the freedom of choice that God gives to every individual, to accept or reject His love and truth. We value every human being equally as a child of God, regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, and regardless of the choices they have made or continue to make. In the context of evangelism, this value of liberty means that we honor every person’s choices, and continue to respect and value that person as a child of God even when that person chooses to disagree with our opinion. We value them as a person even if he or she chooses to go against God’s principles. This means avoiding all forms of coercion, force, or quid pro quo. It means attracting others to the gospel message by love—yes, speaking the truth about the consequences of sin, and addressing sin when it needs to be addressed, but never withholding love for that person regardless of their choices.

Review of Evangelistic Practices

While there is certainly some variance in evangelistic approach, prophecy-based evangelism has changed little over the decades. Mark Finley, a veteran evangelist, outlines this traditional evangelistic approach in his 2013 book, *Fulfilling God’s End-Time Mission: A*

Comprehensive Evangelism Training Manual.²⁰ A typical Adventist prophecy series will consist of between twenty to twenty-eight presentations over a four to six week period.²¹ Each presentation includes eye-popping graphics and study guides. A registration table is used to collect names and contact info for follow-up. The meetings are advertised as a prophecy series, often themed on Revelation.²² Typically, meetings begin by studying Daniel 2 & 7, and consist of a systematic exposition of Adventist doctrines such as the law, the Sabbath, and the state of the dead, interspersed with themes from Revelation, ultimately culminating in the message of Revelation 14.²³ Due to the fast pace and vast amount of doctrinal material to cover, the presentations and study guides are arranged topically, pulling in texts from various places in Scripture to support the conclusions made.

The goal of the evangelistic series is for individuals to make decisions with radical, life-altering implications: the decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, to keep the Sabbath, to live healthfully, and to embrace the new teachings and lifestyle of Adventism.²⁴ Evangelists are trained to encourage attendees to make these decisions, both by appeals from the pulpit and calls for decision during in-home visitation.²⁵

Once a decision is made, the pastor or evangelist who is performing the baptism is responsible to see that the candidate is grounded in “the truth” and is practicing what they know. While human leaders cannot read the heart, they can see external factors. Important indicators

²⁰Finley, Mark. *Fulfilling God's End-Time Mission: A Comprehensive Evangelism Training Manual*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2013.

²¹Ibid, 89-93

²²Ibid, 60

²³Ibid, 87-93

²⁴Ibid, 151-152

²⁵Ibid, 159-168

that a candidate is ready for baptism include taking a stand for the Sabbath, giving up tobacco and alcohol, and living according to the principles of biblical marriage.²⁶

Not surprisingly, newly baptized members frequently face difficult challenges. Having made so many radical and life-altering decisions over the past weeks, many find themselves thrust into a community that may have difficulty identifying with the struggles of the new believer. Unless a process of discipleship is put in place to pick up where the evangelistic series left off, the few who made it through the series can struggle to maintain their Christian experience.²⁷

Highlighting Ethical Concerns

As stated before, Seventh-day Adventists have a strong deontological ethic: doing what is right, because it is right, regardless of the consequences. This is notably demonstrated in the regard for the seventh-day Sabbath, and the stand that many Adventists have taken for the Sabbath regardless of losing employment, family ties or even liberty and life.

This strongly deontological ethical framework fosters a culture of traditionalism: we do right because it is right, regardless of what others do. This can lead to the assumption that what we do is inherently right, because we've always done it that way, and any other way is therefore wrong.²⁸ In this case, prophecy-focused Adventist evangelism is a prime example. The Adventist approach to evangelism has changed little over the past century-and-a-half, despite radical changes in culture, technology, and just about every other aspect of life.²⁹

²⁶Ibid 169-175

²⁷Ibid, 177-185

²⁸Jensen, Richard. "Religion, Morality, and American Politics." *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* 6, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1982): 328.

²⁹Hannon, Rich. "The Adventist Evangelistic Dilemma." *Spectrum Magazine*, January 2020. <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2020/adventist-evangelistic-dilemma>.

Some leaders within the Adventist church are asking whether this model of prophecy-focused evangelism is even the right thing to do, given our current culture.³⁰ Rich Hannon asks the question in a recent article in Spectrum Magazine, “Is historic evangelistic content God-ordained irrespective of time and circumstance?”³¹ Hannon argues that the historic prophecy-focused evangelistic paradigm, birthed in 19th century America, focused on teaching the distinctive truths of Adventism to a largely Christian audience. It is true that our focus on fulfilled prophecy in the Bible is a strong argument for the existence of God and the authority of the Bible, but a 19th century paradigm can also gloss over the fundamentals of Christianity in favor of focusing on prophetic distinctives. This may have been expedient and forgivable in 19th century America, as the majority of those listening would already have a basic understanding of Christianity. But what about today?

In today’s culture, one cannot assume that most of the American population are Christian.³² Hence the wrong evangelistic emphasis can actually lead people to embrace a set of beliefs without first accepting Christ. Admittedly, Adventist evangelists have made a strong effort in the past decades to make the prophecy-focused evangelism more Christ-centered. But is it possible that using some of the same old evangelistic methods in today’s culture could be not only misguided, but also unethical?

Prophecy-focused evangelism is an excellent way to teach “correct” doctrines and lifestyle practices, but if the eschatology and culture isn’t rooted firmly in the principles of Christian doctrine, it becomes a half-truth. For instance, we can teach how the Sabbath was changed to Sunday because of the pagan influence in the early medieval church, and how this change was

³⁰Gonzalez, Cesar. “Perspectives: Ethical Evangelism.” (2019.) Accessed October 31, 2020. <http://www.columbiaunion.org/content/perspectives-ethical-evangelism>.

³¹Hannon

³²Pew Research Center. “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” (June 9, 2020). <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

prophesied in Scripture. But if we fail to connect the Sabbath to our relationship to Christ, we can teach people to keep the Sabbath out of fear. People can also use the same logic to argue that we should equally oppose all holidays with pagan origins (Christmas, Easter, etc). It is that relationship with Christ that gives meaning to the Sabbath, hope in the Second coming, and reason to avoid the false teachings of the “beast.”

While major Adventist evangelists have done a good job of making Christ the center of the prophetic messages, the church is still criticized for emphasizing a peculiar eschatology, worldview, and lifestyle above its emphasis on basic Christian doctrine.³³

Ever since the days of William Miller, Adventists have used the sensational nature of Biblical prophecy to raise interest and draw a crowd.³⁴ And when we believe that we have a Biblical mandate to take the message to the world, it would seem both ethical and almost obligatory to use any means possible to grip the attention of the multitudes.

However, there is a fine ethical line between sharing a message that is gripping—even sensational—and *sensationalism*.³⁵ A sensational message grabs attention because of its shocking truth—*sensationalism* is the tendency to bend the truth in order to grab attention. From an ethical standpoint, one can be dishonest without telling an outright lie. This is the modus operandi of sensational journalism or, in our case, sensational evangelism. In a world where more and more information competes for our attention every day, Adventist evangelism has resorted to increasingly creative and sensational ways to spread the message. A typical evangelistic series is advertised with flashy graphics and claims or implications of uncovering hidden secrets about the future. Association with a local church or denomination is downplayed

³³Lee, Chris. “Prophecy Show 2012: We Go Inside the Theatrics of Adventist Evangelism.” *Proclamation! Magazine*, Vol. 13, No 2. (Summer 2012).

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Edeze, Sunny Emmanuel, and Chikezie Emmanuel Uzuegbunam. “Sensationalism in the Media: the Right to Sell or the Right to Tell?” *Journal of Communication and Media Research* 5, no. 1 (2013): 69–78.

or hidden, and advertising usually fails to disclose even the length of the series of meetings, often advertising only the first weekend of meetings.

A brief review of one popular resource used by local Adventist churches and conferences demonstrates this bent toward sensationalism. Of the 8 campaign titles listed under “Reaping Campaigns,” all are designed to grab attention, playing on both curiosity and fear. Here is one example:

- **Final Events:** Are you prepared for what happens next?

Prophecies from the Bible are unfolding right in front of our eyes. These cataclysmic events point to a critical change in our world coming in the near future. Learn to decipher prophecies of the Bible, and more.

The graphic shows a globe exploding, surrounded by a photo collage depicting world leaders, disasters, and unrest.

Meeting topics also have a tendency to be long on sensation and small in information. Mark Finley’s “Revelation of Hope” series includes titles like “Revelation’s Predictions for the Twenty-First Century” and “Revelation Exposes History’s Greatest Hoax.” Titles like these strain credulity—they border on dishonesty. After all, Revelation does not make specific predictions for the 21st century (despite the fact that we believe much prophecy will be fulfilled in this century). The topic of the meeting is “to introduce Revelation as God’s hopeful answer to our world’s overwhelming problems.” Thus it’s an overview of prophecy and God’s message of hope—very good material but nothing that would be “predictions for the Twenty-First Century.”

“Revelation Exposes History’s Greatest Hoax,” is a message dealing with the change of the Sabbath, and specifically focuses on Daniel 7. While the Sabbath does become a central focus in last day events, as we believe, supporting such a conclusion requires studying much

more than just Revelation—as Revelation scarcely mentions the Sabbath specifically at all!

Again, this is a sensational title that borders on dishonesty, especially considering the topic this title is designed to introduce.

Other areas of honesty plague the typical prophecy-focused evangelistic series. Christian’s don’t generally like to come to meetings sponsored by a specific denomination, especially when those meetings are designed specifically to advance denominational dogma. Seventh-day Adventists, in particular, face a great deal of prejudice. In light of this fact, evangelists often try every means possible to distance the meetings from the Adventist name and denomination. This is usually accomplished by renting a public hall to hold the meetings, and omitting any church name or affiliation from advertising material, instead using the name of the series, the evangelist, or sometimes the name of the supporting ministry for branding. Sometimes volunteers are instructed not to disclose their affiliation with the Adventist Church.³⁶ Because of cost, and the expectation that crowds will dwindle as truths are presented, the meetings that begin in a public hall typically transition to the local Adventist church at some point. Also, the full duration of the meetings isn’t typically advertised to the public (to allow for this “surprise” transition), so attendees know little about what they’re signing up for when they come in the first night.

This is all clever marketing—and it works, or at least this is what has worked in years gone by. These methods have been honed and refined by time-honored evangelists. But is it right? In a deontological ethical framework, which we claim to follow, when answering these questions of “right” and “wrong,” we base our analysis on principle—regardless of the results. If these practices are deceitful, then how can we be justified in using deceit to advance the cause of God?

³⁶Healing Road. “Why SDAs Hide Their Identity.. in Their Own Words.” Last modified February 6, 2010. Accessed October 29, 2020. <https://8thday4life.wordpress.com/2010/02/06/why-sdas-hide-their-identity-in-their-own-words/>.

Honest Methods

Our Christian ethic is founded on the principle of keeping God’s commandments. While the fourth commandment has become our watch-word, do we teach the fourth commandment while breaking the ninth? Is it possible that in our methods of prophecy-focused Adventist evangelism, we have sold ourselves short? Is it possible that, in our excitement to get people through the door on opening night, we’ve traded our integrity for a short-term win?

Evangelists of all people must hold themselves to a high standard of honesty and integrity. This includes honesty with historical facts. One case in point—many Adventist evangelists continue to reference a popular but shaky theory about the “number of the beast.”³⁷ Evangelists have taught that a common title of the pope, “Vicarius Filii Dei,” is a fulfillment of this prophecy and that this number helps identify the papacy with this “beast” of Revelation 13. The theory that this title appeared on a papal tiara was long ago debunked, and the title is rarely used in Catholic literature, yet it still appears in Adventist evangelistic material.^{38 39 40}

This issue of honesty must definitely extend to the use of Scripture. While Adventists are known for being thorough students of Scripture, the methods typically used in prophecy-focused evangelism demonstrate less-than-ideal principles of exegesis. Adventist study guides and presentations present a compelling, seemingly invincible case by quoting verses and short passages, mostly devoid of context. In most cases, believe that their use can be supported by studying the context. However, we foster a poor method of Bible study and teach methods that

³⁷Revelation 13:18

³⁸“Here is wisdom” [Revelation 13:17], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (SDABC), rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976-1980), 7:823-824.

³⁹Stefanovic, Ranko. *Plain Revelation*. (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2013): 165-169

⁴⁰Finley, Mark. “The Mark of the Beast and the Mystery Number 666” in *Search for Certainty Bible Studies* 26 (Thousand Oaks, California: It Is Written, 1999).

can lead people to accept virtually any false teaching as well.⁴¹ Like Paul, we must preach the gospel “not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully.” (2 Corinthians 4:2)

Consider the study on the Adventist doctrine of the state of the dead. Mark Finley presents this study in his Search for Certainty lessons as a series of passages with little commentary.⁴² Question #8 in this lesson asks, “Are human beings conscious at death? How much do they know?” The reference given is Ecclesiastes 9:5-6:

“For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; Nevermore will they have a share In anything done under the sun.”

It’s a powerful “proof text” for unconsciousness in death, but by itself it would seem that Solomon is making an argument only on appearances. One could argue that Solomon is denying the reality of the resurrection, future reward or judgment. Solomon is making an argument for the futility of life—all life ends in death—and he is describing death from a human standpoint. It isn’t until you reach Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 that you find an implication of judgment and afterlife. In its context, this text is a good argument for the teaching of “soul sleep” in death, but it requires studying below the surface, and at face value could be inconclusive if we don’t teach these principles of study.

⁴¹Downing, Larry. “The Art and Practice of Biblical Proof-Texting.” *Adventist Today* (January 2017). <https://atoday.org/the-art-and-practice-of-biblical-proof-texting/>.

⁴²Finley, Mark. “The Real Truth About Death” in *Search for Certainty Bible Studies 16* (Thousand Oaks, California: It Is Written, 1999).

A similar proof text is used to prove that we will still keep the Sabbath in heaven⁴³: Isaiah 66:23:

“And it shall come to pass That from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me, says the LORD.

This passage is obviously speaking of the New Earth (verse 22). We make a big deal about the Sabbath from this one verse, but what about the “New Moon”? This verse is good evidence in our case for the Sabbath, but it also mentions another festival—the “New Moon,” which we rarely speak of and could weaken our case. We can make a strong case for the Sabbath being applied to Christians and (by extension) into eternity from the New Testament, combined with the testimony of this passage.

Even the text that we use to support our “proof text” or “verses-here-and-there” method of Bible study is itself violently wrested from its Biblical context: Isaiah 28:10.

“For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little.”

The words translated “precept upon precept” etc. come from a series of very short repeated words in the original Hebrew. From the context, the prophet was likely quoting the babbling mockery of the drunken priests and prophets, who when they heard the word of the Lord, refused to understand.⁴⁴

Even if the end result of these “proof-text” methods is to teach people Biblical truth, this end does not justify dishonest means. If a text poses legitimate challenges to our position, or has

⁴³Finley, Mark. “Christ’s Special Sign” in *Search for Certainty Bible Studies 12* (Thousand Oaks, California: It Is Written, 1999).

⁴⁴MacLaren, Alexander. “The Judgment of Drunkards and Mockers” [Isaiah 28:1-13] *Expositions of Holy Scripture*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905.

an equally valid alternative interpretation, it would be fair to at least acknowledge those, rather than sweep these “under the rug” to be discovered later on critical reflection.

The purpose of evangelism is not simply to convey information, but to train participants in the arts of personal Bible study (hermeneutics) and critical thinking. If in our zeal to convince our listeners of “the truth” we short-circuit this process, we set up our listeners to be deceived by the next shyster or con-artists who comes along with their own bag of proof texts.

Demonstrating Christ’s Love

Honesty is an important ethical consideration, and one to which not enough thought has been given in prophecy-focused Adventist evangelism. There are other ethical considerations worthy of note, however. One of the most basic ethical considerations for Christians has to do with loving and valuing other human beings, regardless of their convictions or religious persuasions.

It is true that Bible prophecy specifically identifies religious systems, even in the present day, which are at war with God’s truth. Most notable are the first and second beast of Revelation 13—identified by Adventists as the power of the Roman Catholic Church and of the United States of America, respectively. While it would be hard to find an evangelist in this country today who is unpatriotic, many don’t mince words when it comes to speaking against the evils and abuses of the Catholic church—especially on issues such as the change of the Sabbath, suppression of the Bible, and use of its influence over secular power to coerce worship and persecute those who believed and taught according to the Bible.

While it’s not wrong—and actually commendable—to identify systems of abuse and oppression, this prophecy-focused evangelism often results in bolstering an anti-catholic

sentiment among church members. If we focus too strongly on our opposition to “catholic” or “pagan” teaching, we can form an identity based on what we oppose. Instead, we should teach believers to form their identity in Christ. Then, from this vantage ground of a Christ-centered identity, we can more easily recognize systems of error while loving God’s children who still cling to them.

The church’s official stance condemns bigotry toward others, including people in the Roman Catholic faith.⁴⁵ While mainstream evangelists today are careful to nuance the discussion of the Catholic Church so as not to arouse hatred against Catholic people, a subculture of anti-catholic sentiment still exists within the church and is fed by various independent ministries.

One area that is often of concern with evangelism is the fine line that comes when making appeals for decision. Certainly there is much support, from the Christian worldview and ethic of evangelism, for using scripture, logic, and appropriate powers of persuasion to encourage others to make good decisions. On the other hand, all forms of pressure, manipulation and coercion should be condemned. Certainly, outright manipulation in Adventist evangelism in this country is probably uncommon. However, the format of the prophecy-focused meetings, with topics arranged over many successive nights, can seem manipulative to attendees who come looking for information and answers. Attendees who ask questions and are told to come back for many nights to hear the answer, may feel they are being “led down the garden path.” In an age when information can be easily and freely accessed on the Internet, perhaps it’s time to revise our method of answering difficult questions.

⁴⁵General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Administrative Committee. “How Seventh-day Adventists View Roman Catholicism” (April 15, 1997). <https://www.adventist.org/articles/how-seventh-day-adventists-view-roman-catholicism/>.

As attendees accept Biblical truth during the prophecy series, they are also (ideally) forming relationships with the church members at the same time. When an attendee reaches a subject on which they are not ready to accept the Adventist position, it's important that they are not made to feel that their newly-formed relationships are held on the line when considering whether to accept a given teaching of Adventism. God commands us to love our neighbor, and anything short of unconditional love is unethical and manipulative. Just as God has given us freedom from guilt and sin, we must give others the freedom to accept truth at their own pace, without "shunning" or making others feel unwelcome if they don't immediately see eye-to-eye with church positions.

This can be especially difficult, but is imperative to communicate, in the process of clearing for baptism. At baptism, the doctrines of Adventism become a package deal. If someone accepts most of the tenants of Adventism, but struggles with others, they aren't qualified to be baptized. The pastor or leader working with these members must be careful not to hold out baptism as a means of coercing individuals to assent to teachings they don't truly believe, and members must create a culture where visitors and interests are loved and accepted at every point in their spiritual journey.

This is especially imperative to consider when addressing lifestyle issues, including modesty, diet, marriage, and particularly our relationship with LGBTQ+ individuals and community. While these issues don't directly relate to the "prophetic" aspects of evangelism, lifestyle issues are always addressed at some point in traditional Adventist evangelism. While the truth must be spoken, the way in which it is spoken can raise ethical issues. The Adventist stance on some issues (particularly marriage questions) is considered by many in today's culture to be unethical by definition. While a full discussion of issues relating to individuals in the LGBTQ+

community is outside the scope of this paper, the church has made an important distinction that must be emphasized to our members and community.⁴⁶ While we are “opposed to homosexual practices and relationships,” we recognize that “Jesus affirmed the dignity of all human beings.”⁴⁷ The church position does not condemn a person who is same-sex attracted, for instance, even though it would condemn a same-sex relationship (the same way it would condemn a polyamorous relationship or any other unbiblical relationship). Jesus Himself was “tempted in all points as we are” yet he was “without sin” (Hebrews 4:15), so being tempted does not make one sinful. Yet there are clearly sexual practices that are condemned in Scripture. (Leviticus 18:22, Exodus 20:14, Hebrews 13:4 etc.) This may still seem “unethical” to call a common practice sinful, but again, we can make a distinction between condemning a practice while still loving and accepting the person. A careful communication of this distinction and a commitment to love and respect all individuals regardless of their choices would go a long ways towards improving the ethical reputation of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Speaking of ethics: we claim to have a message for “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people.”⁴⁸ Yet time after time, our prophecy meetings are advertised in the exact same way, to the exact same group of people: by a flashy brochure sent through the mail. How unethical is it to ignore those who aren’t interested in a flashy, sensational prophecy brochure in the mailbox? Only a certain segment of people would be interested in attending a seminar that is advertised through the mail. Many people never see these fliers. Many others may want to come, but are

⁴⁶Koranteng-Pipim, Samuel. “Born a Gay and Born Again? Adventism’s Changing Attitude Toward Homosexuality.” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 10/1-2 (1999): 141–183. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1408&context=jats>.

⁴⁷General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee. “Homosexuality” (October 17, 2012). <https://www.adventist.org/articles/homosexuality/>.

⁴⁸Revelation 14:6

unable to. Of those who see it, how many are turned off by the flashy, sensational appeal? Should this be our only tool of preaching this message to our communities?

Shunning Selfish Motives

At this point, I must address perhaps the most glaring ethical concern in much of Seventh-day Adventist evangelism: a paradigm which is assumed in the introduction. Do we assume that the purpose of evangelism is to foster church growth? This is certainly ethical and commendable if, by “Church Growth”, we mean expanding the “Kingdom of God” in a spiritual sense.

But if we mean anything else by “Church Growth,” I ask these questions in conclusion: Is the end goal of proclamation to build numbers in attendance at our worship services? To expand the “tithe base” of the church members? To bolster the church coffers and the ego of the evangelist? If so, then the entire prospect of evangelism is entirely self-serving. It is self-evangelism in the name of God—the definition of moral and ethical bankruptcy.

Suggestions for Mitigating Ethical Concerns

A recent study highlighted the fact that businesses and organizations who take the high road morally and ethically actually can improve their bottom line.^{49 50} In the same way, the Adventist church can improve by addressing the real and perceived ethical concerns present in our primary mode of reaching out to our neighbors and communities. Is the prophecy-focused method of proclamation ethically bankrupt? Not necessarily. Not every concern mentioned is inherently unethical. After all, Noah’s message was both sensational and prophetic: the warning

⁴⁹May, D. R., Chang, Y. K., & Shao, R. (2015). Does ethical membership matter? Moral identification and its organizational implications. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(3), 681–694. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038344>.

⁵⁰Sher, Ben. “Corporate Ethics Can Affect an Organization’s Bottom Line.” (November 2019). <https://www.ioatwork.com/corporate-ethics-can-affect-bottom-line/>.

of a coming flood. In a similar way, Seventh-day Adventists take the Biblical mandate to proclaim an end-time prophetic message to the world, symbolized by the three angels of Revelation 14.

Prophecy-focused evangelism is a tool—and it has been a useful tool that provides a framework for systematically presenting the teachings of the Bible in the community. But there need to be other tools in the toolbox. We have tools for *connecting* with the community: health programs, community services, children’s ministries, and most importantly, building one-on-one relationships. However, these tools cannot be used to replace an evangelistic series. We need to build other frameworks for presenting the Adventist message in a complete way—thinking outside the box of traditional prophecy-focused evangelism. It needs to be relevant, deal with current issues that our next generation is facing, Biblically sound, and ethically acceptable. Examples may include suicide prevention, managing depression, the quest for love, purpose in life, controlling anxiety, abuse recovery, and social justice. It should include prophecy, but prophecy does not need to be the only focus.

SUMMARY

In the introduction to this paper, it was noted that prophecy-focused evangelism in America is increasingly less effective at reaching emerging generations in the majority culture. It was postulated that one cause for this decline may be an increased awareness of ethical concerns relating to the methods of conducting prophecy-focused evangelism. We have demonstrated that ethical concerns do exist in the way that Seventh-day Adventist prophecy-focused evangelism has been conducted. These ethical concerns range from sensationalism to perceived dishonesty in

advertising; sometimes hiding our true identity, teaching poor hermeneutics for the sake of simplicity and failing to address inconsistencies in scriptural application. Other concerns related to fostering hatred toward groups of people (such as Catholics), and using (perceived or actual) manipulative techniques to keep attendees coming back and to gain decisions.

Finally, we briefly discussed ways in which these concerns can be addressed. We discussed shifting the paradigm of evangelism away from “Church Growth” and toward “Kingdom Growth” and ultimately faithfulness to God’s calling.

Conclusions

Prophecy-focused Adventist evangelism is not ethically bankrupt, but it is in need of reform. We must stop using bait-and-switch tactics in advertising, and diversify our advertising methods. We must learn to speak more openly and candidly when discussing difficult and controversial passages, and must learn to be sensitive to others’ viewpoints which are different from ours. Our message must center in Christ, and our teachings must spring from that Christ-centered identity, teaching the truth while not fostering hatred towards others. Finally, our friendship must be genuine and demonstrate unconditional love towards all, before and after baptism.

It is my firm belief that by prayerfully considering the ethical concerns outlined in the paper, Adventists leaders and evangelists can find ways to addressing and mitigating these concerns and to proclaim the Biblical message truthfully and honestly, in the spirit of Christ.

Suggestions for Further Research

This paper has touched on a wide range of ethical considerations relating to prophecy-focused evangelism. Several topics mentioned—such as ethical considerations in our relations to the LGBTQ+ community—deserve a thorough research on their own. In making the case for this paper, it would be helpful to trace a more solid causal relationship between ethical blunders in evangelism and attrition of members and attendees. Evidence abounds in websites and periodicals dedicated to “helping” former Adventists, but time and space prevent a thorough investigation of these claims. Perhaps most helpful would be research to develop and test new methods of Adventist evangelism among emerging generations in Western culture, that are relevant to the needs and questions asked by the younger generations, and presented in formats that are more readily connected with. Such methods would be helpful from the standpoint of church growth (regardless of the ethics of focusing on that metric), but most importantly, I believe, would bring glory to God through the advancement of His Kingdom and the hastening of His soon return!⁵¹

⁵¹2 Peter 3:12

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