

CAN'T SEE THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES

BY JEFF REICH

My wife Christy answered the phone: “How do I get to your house!” yelled a male voice.

“Who is this?” Christy asked. “Bill! How do I get to your house!” the man yelled again. She gave Bill the directions.

“Do you know a man by the name of Bill?” Christy asked me.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I know a lot of Bills,” I answered, with a touch of sarcasm in my voice.

“Well, this Bill was talking really loud on the phone and asked how to get to our house,” she explained.

“Do you know how many Bills I know...” I started to say, then paused. “Oh, I think I know who this Bill is.” I smiled and asked, “Is he coming today?”

Let me tell you about Bill (which is not his real name). Bill is an older man, a bachelor, who lives in the mountains by himself in a small travel trailer. He does not have electricity or running water so he does not always have access to a shower. Bill cannot hear very well so he speaks very loudly, which annoys some people. He is also an Adventist. This is Bill, and he didn't arrive that day.

The next day was one of those days! Have you ever had one of those days? You know, Murphy's Law—if anything can go wrong it will go wrong! Our office was pushing to meet our magazine deadline at Pacific Press when the computer crashed. A few days before our website computer had died and was still dead. We were short on office workers. Missionaries were sending emails asking for counsel and help. A board meeting was coming up the next week and the accounting and agenda items needed to be pulled together, but it seemed there would not be enough time to get ready. We were all under a lot of pressure.



Director of Laymen Ministries, Jeff Reich and his wife Christy.

One of our workers came running up the stairs to the office, "Guess who's here?" he declared with a smile, "Bill!" He went on, "And you should see his car!" Yes, Bill's car. What a sight!

My immediate thought was, "Oh no, not now. Any day but today!" I began to say, "Tell Bill I'm too busy today." But as I thought about this I remembered what I have often preached to other people: "There is no such thing as coincidence! If the Lord sends someone across your path, there is a reason." And I also remembered, "Christ died for Bill."

Have you ever had an argument with the Holy Spirit? "OK, OK," I gave in. Putting on a big plastic smile as if everything was great, I headed downstairs. Now, I want to ask you a question. Does the Holy Spirit ever ask you to do something you don't want to do? It happens to me all the time. That's why Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Following Jesus means we deny our selfish feelings and desires, and choose to do what is right.

I went downstairs and greeted Bill with a smile and shook his hand. Then I set out to give him a tour of our facility, just as if he was one of the major contributors to the ministry. (Doesn't God hate partiality? James 2:9 states, "But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin." In Christ's sight, we are all of equal importance. I praise God that He does not judge as man judgeth!)

I took Bill to our studio and showed him around. On the way back to the main office, we walked through a section of forest that lies between the buildings. Passing an old dead log, I paused, "Let's sit here and talk awhile, Bill. How are things going for you?" I asked.



Bill looked reflectively at the ground and began to explain, "Jeff, I know I sometimes come across as being a little different. I can't hear very well and I talk loud, and I know that bothers some people, but that should not have caused the elders at a church I was visiting to tell me I was not welcome last Sabbath." Bill went on to explain how in many churches he is ostracized. After services the people form into their different little "cliques" and go home together, leaving Bill by himself.

He told me how he went to an Independent campmeeting being held in a rented building. He was asked at the door, "Bill, where are you going to take your shower?" Then he was told, "Oh, and there is no camping allowed on the grounds." On Sabbath he returned to see people camping all over the grounds!

As Bill talked, my mind went back to the thoughts I'd had earlier as I stood upstairs in my office. "What if," I thought to myself, "I would have followed through on my feelings and had not made time for Bill?" I would have just added to the list of bitter memories that Bill already has from his dealings with "Christians." I asked Bill if he would like to pray, so we knelt down right there and talked to God together.

A Lesson to Be Learned

Yes, sometimes it seems as though we can't see the forest through the trees! We believe in outreach and claim to be Christians, but sometimes it seems the plainest "Christian" opportunities pass us by without a thought. What is the true description of a Christian? In 2 Corinthians 1:12 we are told that "our rejoicing is this," that "the testimony of our conscience" is held "in simplicity and godly sincerity." What is godly sincerity? Well, godly means like God, right? That's easy to understand—we should reflect the character of God in our lives. But how about "godly sincerity?" What does that mean?

To be sincere is to be genuine and true. In the Greek text it means, "found pure when unfolded and examined by the sun's light." A common test used by bee keepers in the old days was to strain raw honey over and over until, holding the honey up to the sunlight, it was found to be "sine-cera,"—"without wax," no trace of cera to be seen floating in it. That is what Paul says you and I are to be like as Christians. God cleanses us in the blood of Christ, and holds us up in the light of His life. We are to be transparent in all that we do, as tested by the Son of Righteousness. We are to be the transparent medium that the light of God's love can shine through. "Ye are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).



My experience with Bill helped me to remember what I had learned years before about turning my ear away from someone who needs help, for in this case that "someone" was me.

What's a "Mission?"

During the summer my family was heavily involved in ministry with our local church. I was giving Bible studies in the community, teaching Sabbath School class, and we were also involved with everything from cooking schools to stop smoking programs, as well as helping with public evangelism. Sometimes we would get really burned out and needed rest—so in the winter we headed to the desert in the southwestern part the U.S. to spend a few weeks with my brother and sister-in-law.

It was great spending Sabbath out on the red sandstone mesas, reading books to the children. We had quiet time in the wilderness just to "air our heads out," and spend quality time as a family. The winter weather in the desert was usually a warm 65° to 70°, that is, during the day.

Early one Sabbath I wanted to drive about 65 miles to a really beautiful place to hike, with big sandstone rocks and a spectacular view of the surrounding mesas. To get to this place we had to drive through a "mission."

Before I continue, I would like to ask you a question. "What is a mission?" You are right! It is a place where missionaries live and work. Well, keep going. What else? What do missionaries do? Yes, that's right. They teach people about Jesus. And what else? They help people. That is why doctors and dentists and other types of people work at a mission.

An Indian to the Rescue!

Early Sabbath morning we headed to our special place, driving through the Adventist “mission” as the morning sun was melting the frost from the ground around the mesas. We spent several hours climbing on the huge red sandstone rocks, relaxing in the sunshine and reading Bible stories to the children. It was getting close to lunch time when my wife, Christy, said, “We’d better head on home.”

We climbed into our little red pickup truck and I turned the key. “Errrrrrr,” the starter whined. Soon the starter went, “Urrrr, urrr, ur, click, click, click, click, click, click, click.” You guys know what that means, right? A dead battery. The truck wouldn’t start. What to do? Christy suggested prayer.

Right after we prayed an Indian man came by (we were on an Indian reservation) in a beat up old 1967 Chevy, complete with missing hubcaps and spray paint spots on the doors. “Can I help you?” he asked with a voice full of entreaty.

“I need a jump,” I answered.

He pulled his old Chevy next to my truck and got out of the car. I wondered why he was walking so strangely, holding onto the front fender as he hobbled his way around.

As he came around to the front of the car, I understood—he had polio and was wearing braces on his legs. This kind Indian man seemed bent on helping us. As he came closer, I could smell alcohol on his breath. We tried “jumping” my truck, but when the jumper cables began smoking, I realized my truck was simply not going to start.



“Don’t worry,” the Indian said, “I have friends at the mission. They will help you.” As we climbed into his old Chevy, he kicked a half empty wine bottle under the seat and moved a pile of old dirty papers to the back seat next to where my wife and two little children were going to sit.

I thought to myself, “This is going to be interesting!” Here we were, dressed in old hiking clothes, and accompanied by an Indian who had clearly been drinking, driving a beat up old car, and we were headed to the mission on Sabbath to get help!

Fellowship Meal!

As we pulled up in front of a house the Indian said, “This is the doctor’s house.” And guess what? Church had just got out and everyone had gone to the doctor’s house for a Sabbath fellowship meal! The Indian and I made our way to the door. “Knock, knock, knock.” The doctor’s wife opened the door. Now, I have been told that 80% of communication is “nonverbal,” and in this case no words were needed.

She looked us over from top to bottom and then with a wry face asked, “Yes, may I help you?”

“My friend’s car is broken down in the desert. He needs help,” my Indian friend slurred. The lady turned to talk to the people in the house. I overheard one man say, “But today is the Sabbath!” Another voice added, “And we were just getting ready to eat.” She shut the door for a few moments and then two men came out.

“Where is your truck?” one of the men asked coldly. I explained where it was. “We’ll be right back,” and they took off across the yard and down the street. Soon they came back with an old military ambulance and a chain so they could give me a pull.

“I really appreciate your help,” I said as we bounced down the dirt road. There was no response. On arrival they hopped out, hooked up the chain, looked at me and said, “We’ll pull you and you can try to get it started.”

The truck never would start (I found out later the timing chain gear broke), so eventually we ended up back at the doctor’s house. On arriving, the men jumped out of the old ambulance and ran into the house. I think they must have been hungry. About this time my wife, with our two year old in her backpack, and our four year old holding onto her hand, came walking up the street from the mission school playground.

“What are we going to do now?” she asked.

“Looks like we need to hitchhike a ride home and come back to get the truck after Sabbath,” I answered.

I went to the door and asked if it would be OK to leave the truck where it was for a few days till I could get a trailer and retrieve it. The doctor’s wife was kind and told me it was fine there. As we turned to walk away, the door to the house opened once more and the doctor’s wife asked us if we would like something to eat before we left.

“We have about 65 miles to go and it’s going to get dark soon,” I explained.

“OK,” she said with a smile, “Have a safe trip!”

A Christian Smile

As I mentioned earlier, in the desert the daytime temperatures can be a pleasant 60° to 70°, but as soon as it gets dark, the temperatures can quickly drop below freezing, even into the teens or twenties. I had a knot in my stomach as I walked down the road with my two little children and my wife, leaving the “mission” compound. After walking about two miles we saw a nice Mercedes coming down the highway. I stuck out my thumb for a ride. Guess who it was—the doctor and his wife! She gave a nice big Christian smile as she drove by and waved at us. My heart sank.

Missions—we support them. And I understand that people can get burned out on helping, especially at a mission—but do we as a people sometimes not see the forest through the trees?

We can be called “missionaries,” but if we let those who have needs—even if they are not the people our “mission” is focused on—pass by when we have the ability, and even the spiritual gifts to help them, are we not going to be held accountable? If we are not going to be a service to people, then what is the point of being a missionary anyhow?

A little later an old beat-up green Dodge van pulled over and picked us up. It was crowded, since it was full of Indians—children, young people and old folks, too. But there was still room for us! I looked around and said to them in a way they all could understand, since the older people did not speak much English, “White man is very cold, but Indians have big heart!” They all grinned from ear to ear.

They let us out about 25 miles from our house. It was now dark and cold as we stood along the highway in the middle of nowhere. Off in the distance we saw headlights coming. I stuck out my thumb. An old clunker of a car pulled over. Two young Indian girls motioned for us to get in.



We all climbed in the back seat. My wife held our youngest daughter on her lap while my other daughter sat on the two cases of beer wedged between my wife and me. “Where ya goin’?” the driver asked. I explained. “We’ll give ya a ride home,” she said with a smile. Then she drove us right to the front door of our house!

Who Were the Missionaries?

As I reflect back on this whole experience I wonder, who were the real missionaries that day? Maybe that is why Jesus said, speaking to the church members of His day, “Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31).

Maybe you think this was an isolated incident, but I think not. We, as a people, send hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions and for the support of missionaries, yet at the same time we can become so blind as to not see a mission opportunity when it is right at our door. In fact, if we are honest we will realize that in the past the Lord has sent someone to our own church, work place, or even home, whose heart was needing someone to talk to, or who was looking for spiritual answers, and we were too blind or too busy to see, or maybe simply didn’t want to see, the missionary opportunity knocking that moment.

Are you a “missionary?” “Well, no, I’m not. I’ve never been involved in ministry,” you might reply. Our thinking is wrong regarding missions and missionary work: As a Christian are you to teach people about Christ? Are you to be helpful and thoughtful? Well then, all Christians should be, by nature, missionaries—and your mission field is wherever you are. More people come in contact with God’s Church six days a week than they do on Sabbath morning in a building. People come in contact with you—and you are the church. This is why the power of the church’s mission rests in the laity. The church will only have a revival when the laymen of the church recognize this one important point.

As a Christian, God has called you (1 Corinthians 7:17), and ordained you to ministry (John 15:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18), and has commissioned you to “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). Our lives are to be a letter of recommendation to people. As they meet us, we recommend them to Christ by our loving actions and words. We have been given “the ministry of reconciliation,” to reconcile people to Jesus Christ.

One More Example

An on-fire layman was handing out books door to door. He stopped at a trailer house where a man by the name of John, smoking a cigarette, answered the door and took one of the books.

Each night after work John would drink beer, smoke some marijuana, light up a cigarette, and read the book. Several weeks later on a Friday John made up his mind—he was going to start keeping the Sabbath! He smoked his last cigarette, dumped out the rest of his pot, and finished his last beer. Sabbath morning he took out the phone book to find a church that worshipped God on the “Sabbath.” He soon spotted the address of the local Adventist Church, hopped in his truck, and drove off to find where the people of God worshipped on the Holy Sabbath day!



“There it is,” he thought to himself as he slowly drove around the block for the third time. “This is where I am supposed to go to church.” He parked his truck and headed in, arriving between Sabbath School and the main church service. He nervously sat down in the sanctuary and waited for church to begin.

After the sermon he made his way to the foyer, where he noticed all the nicely dressed people formed into their little groups, visiting and joking with each other. No one came up and shook his hand or even greeted him. Feeling out of place, he decided to leave. As he turned to find the door an old gentleman greeted him.

“Hello,” he said with a friendly smile. “You must be a visitor?”

“Yes,” John answered nervously.

The old man smiled and said, “So am I!”

What About the Johns You May Meet?

John could have easily slipped through the cracks of the church, but by the workings of the Holy Spirit, he did not. I had an opportunity to meet John some months later, when he told me this story. We began building a friendship, and later a dear pastor friend nurtured him into the truth.

John later came and worked at Laymen Ministries as our printer for a couple of years.

The question is: What about the Johns who cross your path? There are more of them than you realize. We talk about evangelism. We talk about “the caring church.” But do we sometimes miss the forest through the trees? Opportunities abound all around us for making



friends for Christ. God has given us the privilege to be coworkers with Him in saving souls. It is the personal, one-on-one caring for people—all people; the showing of a warm, genuine interest in others that is sometimes lacking in us as church members. We talk about church planting and church growth. We hold seminars to train people in various methodologies, but one key element is often missing—the simple love shown in everyday life to those around us. Our mission is to bond with people, to win their trust and confidence. And then as they trust us, we can begin to share with them what is closest to our hearts—Jesus Christ!