

Title: 1983 Revisited

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The title of my sermon is “1983 Revisited”. But before I get to 1983 I am going to start with the year 1986. In September of 1986 I was sent to the seminary at Andrews University. The experience of the seminary cannot be summed up into one word because there are too many words I can use to describe the experience. From a classroom, and spiritual growth point-of-view, the seminary was tremendous.

One of the reasons I had such a strong time of spiritual growth while at the Seminary was a job I had at the Institute of Church Ministry. The Institute of Church Ministry is the statistical gathering arm of the North American Division. In my capacity as a research assistant and general go-fer, I had the opportunity to read thousands of surveys to learn what was going on in the churches concerning a lot of different issues.

One item we were studying concerned this question: Why do people leave the church? All my pre-conceived ideas were thrown out once the results of this survey came in. In fact, the results of that one particular survey made me re-examine how I understood scripture.

For example, when I first joined the church I heard people use the expression “So & so has left the truth.” This expression was talking about someone who had stopped coming to church. I also heard the phrase “back-slider” in referencing a person who had stopped coming to church.

What this one particular survey taught me was that people who have left the church usually do not leave the church because they stop believing the Bible. And rarely do people who leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church leave because they do not believe the teachings or the doctrines of the church.

What I learned was that slightly over 80 percent of the people who stop attending church do so because something happened, some incident happened, or an accumulation of incidents happened over a period of time, where a person was so hurt, so injured by other people in the church, that going to church, became a horrible place to attend. That is to say: church, instead of a being a place where brothers and sisters in Christ bonded together in the strength of unity — church becomes for some people a place of hurt and pain. Different people can endure differing amounts of hurt, but once a limit is met they usually just drift away.

I begin with this opening illustration today because I have been asked by Pastor Scarborough to come to you with a testimony — my testimony, as to how God reached into my chest cavity and grabbed onto my heart, and to how He has held me tightly.

For some of you — I am no stranger. Twenty years ago I was a shy teenager sitting in the pews of the Gardner church (of course, over on Chestnut Street). But after attending church for about a year and half — that is, in the year 1983 — I was invited by some friends within the Gardner Church to attend some meetings — evangelistic meetings — in Worcester. The Evangelist making the presentation was Elder Kenneth Cox.

I know you as a congregation, like my own church family at Connecticut Valley, are eagerly

anticipating the soon arrival of Elder Cox. Thus, the testimony that Pastor Scarborough has asked me to deliver today is not meant to be a walk down memory lane. I want to come to you today, to hopefully give some sound Biblical thinking which will help the upcoming meetings be a success.

Let us first read a scripture in the book of Acts. — Acts 2:40-42.

41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

42 And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

I mentioned that I first sat in the Gardner Church as a shy 18 year old teenager. I was shy only because I was not used to being in church. But I was very comfortable in the Gardner Church. I had been invited to church by a friend, who had started going to church because they had been invited by a friend, who had been invited by the Rochon family. Just having the Rochon's in church made this place comfortable for me. Mr & Mrs Rochon did not know me, but their son Glen had been one year ahead of me in school, and I knew him well. Two of Glen's neighbors were my best buddies. I knew their son Paul. He was a couple years a head of me in school. And I also knew who their daughter Debbie was. She was 4 years ahead of me in school. Believe me — Debbie had been a varsity cheerleader — and as an eight grader I had believed it was my school spirit duty to know the name of every varsity cheerleader!

What I am describing here for you are human connections. In many ways I am describing for you the results of that survey I talked about in my opening illustration. For if 80 percent of the people who leave the church do so because of broken or hurt relationships — research also proves that about 80 percent of the people join the church because of human relationships.

We read Acts 2 where the first ingathering of people were baptized — did you catch the activities that are described. It says that they devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and to fellowship. To say it another way — they studied the Bible, and they grew their relationships with each other.

We often times emphasize teaching the Bible — which is good. But the word “fellowship” is connected to word “teaching” by a simple conjunction. Meaning that the word “fellowship” is equal to the word “teaching”. We cannot underestimate the importance of the relationships between individuals in the family of God. Teaching is important. Good doctrine is essential, but if good doctrine does not walk hand in hand with good fellowship we have nothing.

When a new person walks into a congregation they are nervous. New people are desperately trying to find a zone of comfort. They are trying to reach out and figure out if they belong. Truth and Bible teachings may get some in the door, but it is the love of the family of God which keeps people in the door. When I walked through the doors of this church and heard the name Rochon I had a connection. It was part of what kept me coming.

Soon after attending church a young family in the church invited my home for lunch. Glee

and Cathy Charlstream became wonderful friends. I will always be in their debt for the kindness and the concern they showed me. I learned about the Bible with them. I learned how to be a joyful Christian with them. They had me convinced before I was even baptized that I needed to be a pastor. And it was through them I received the invitation to go to Worcester and hear Elder Cox speak about prophecy.

Those meetings were great. I learned so much about the Bible. I learned about the work of God. I learned about the deceptions of the Devil. I learned that God had a place for me in His Kingdom. I was so fired up for Jesus. And on June 25th, 1983 I was baptized. One-hundred and twenty people were baptized that day. That day probably still stands as a day when in our conference, the most people were baptized at a single time.

The sad thing is — after about 18 months after that wonderful set of meetings, and that stupendous baptism — only about 12 people out of the 120 were still attending church. Why? I know from empirical data at the time — the people, by in large, had stopped coming to church because they had gone to meetings in Worcester, but were not connected — people-wise — into local congregations. Again, the words, of Acts 2 ring true. The first people baptized were connected to the church by teachings and by fellowship. Most of the people baptized in Worcester had teachings, but had no fellowship.

Now my testimony turns to preaching. In two short months, new people are going to start coming through the doors of this church. They are currently getting the teaching from the videos. They are going to get more teaching from Elder Cox at the meetings. But the part that each of you can do is make this a place of hope, joy, love, and encouragement.

As a pastor, I consider myself to be on an even-keel. I do not get upset too much. Not to many highs. Not too many lows. I have learned that pastoring needs to be a consistent, steady, long-term effort. In other words, there are not too many things which make me boil. But what does drive me crazy is when I hear stories, or witness events where a church member wounds or hurts another person. Let me give you an example.

Several weeks ago a fine member of the congregation mentioned to me that she saw some mother feeding her child in the foyer. Not a big deal. I have often seen a parent giving a child a few crackers or cookies before the worship service in the foyer before the worship service. But what my member told me was that this was not a cookie or cracker snack. The parent had pulled out sandwiches. And the children were eating a meal in the foyer. My member's concern was that this does not look good.

This past Sabbath I learned who the parent was. It was a mother who was coming to church with her 3 daughters, and 3 grand-children. All of them visitors, who had been attending church for about 8 months. I since learned this week, that between Sabbath School and church, the mom sat the children down in the seats of the foyer and proceeded to pull out of a bag a set of Hefty zip-locked sandwiches. And the children began to have their little feast. Then one of the long-time members of the church felt the need to become the "Foyer-Police" and began to enforce some unwritten law. The member walked up to the mother, no hello, no sign of kindness, and said, "You, know, there is another room for that!" And walked away.

The visitor did not know what in the world the foyer-cop had meant — "another room for what?" This mother quickly mentioned it to another member with whom she was friendly,

and this member, with more tact, and love in her heart figured it out, and explained it to the visitor. The visitor was mad. More mad at the manner and the demeaning tone which had been spoken to her.

Let us read another scripture — from Hebrews 10:24, 25.

24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,
25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

It ceases to amaze me how we can major in minors in the church family. Eating sandwiches in the foyer — though not to be desired, is not the end of the world. It is not a theological heresy. Let us try to weigh the two — Visitors and Salvation vs Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches in the foyer. [It's not even a close call].

The writer of Hebrews in these short verses tells us about the purpose of the family or God. The family is to encourage one another to love and to good works.

Too often our gatherings together — whether for worship, or some other program — is viewed through eyes of selfishness. In other words, we determine the value of a program or a day at worship services based upon what we individually received. Worship and fellowship is not about what we get but what we can give. Sabbath mornings are not to be valued or de-valued because the Sabbath School teacher did a good job or not, nor whether there was a good sermon or not. The value of our worship, fellowship, and other program gatherings is based upon what God can do through us to bring love and hope to other people in the family of God. Sabbath Mornings is about worshiping God, and learning about His teaching but it is also about the quality of fellowship we have.

To use my earlier example: Wouldn't it have been better to have gone up to the mother with all those children and said, "I see these children are hungry. It must be difficult to get them all out of the house on time to make it to church. Hey, let's give them a little privacy and a table to eat at next Sabbath. Let me show you where the fellowship hall is. You meet me here next week after Sabbath School, and I'll make sure there is a table, and some cups with water, and I'll help you get the children ready for the worship service."

That would have been encouraging. That would have built cords of love and service. That would have been positive and Christ-like.

I have told my congregation the same thing I am about to tell you. Ken Cox is coming — he will preach good, strong, prophetic, and Biblical sermons. The truth will be heard. But the success of the meetings — success being measured by people we shall see in the Kingdom of heaven — will be determined largely by us. How will we treat the new people coming through the doors. Yes, during the meetings. But more importantly, those who keep coming after the meetings and the excitement is gone. Is there going to be an overwhelming need and desire in our hearts to bond with them. The responsibility is upon us — not the visitors. The responsibility to be caring, to enter into fellowship, to be patient,