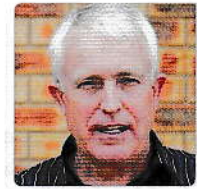


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Insights for mission *from the context and flow of* Revelation 14:6–12

For most commentators, the book of Revelation is the place to go for last-day events. And rightly so, for in this book, referred to as the “Apocalypse of John,” final events are portrayed in graphic language.

Yet, there is more to Revelation than just end-time events. Linked to those events is something deeper, and that is the call to mission. Revelation is a *missionary* book. It demonstrates that mission flows from God’s heart. Grace and peace come from Him. He “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:4, 5).¹ This began long before Calvary or even Bethlehem: Jesus was “the Lamb . . . slain from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). He extends an open invitation to all who wish to “Come!”—and His mission culminates in His return (Rev. 22:17, 20).

The Apocalypse provides unique insights into God’s mission. Could this revelation also suggest strategies for mission? Might the context, order, and flow of the book, and specifically the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14, provide helpful insights for evangelism and disciple making? This article seeks to address these questions.

Unfolding God’s message

The idea that the context and flow of the three angels’ messages provide

a framework for mission is not new. It was articulated by pioneer Adventist evangelist and seminary teacher J. L. Shuler, who shaped the preaching of about 3,000 Adventist pastors—including William Fagal, founding speaker and director of *Faith for Today*; George Vandeman, founding speaker and director of *It Is Written*; and public evangelists Fordyce Detamore, who developed a ministry for former members, and John F. Coltheart, who pioneered an archaeological approach—first using *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* for his opening meetings.²

Shuler taught that an evangelistic series should be “the plain unfolding of the special message of Revelation 14 . . . a connected exposition of that threefold message, *with Christ as the center*.”³ His commitment to this method was seen in his preaching.⁴ Early in a series of meetings, he would present Revelation 14:6–12, not attempting to explain the three messages but, simply, to whet the appetite of his audience. These messages then provided the framework and order that enabled him to progressively unwrap each message—going “no farther into the truth in any one sermon than the people are able to follow.”⁵

The context

Before identifying the flow in the messages, we need to see their context.

The vision of Revelation 12–14 provides a graphic account of the experiences of God’s people, with Jesus’ birth, sacrifice, ascension, and the attacks of evil against Him all dramatically portrayed. The three angels expose a rampant trinity of evil—the dragon, beast, and false prophet—using spiritual deception, economic sanctions, and manipulative force (Rev. 13:1–18; 19:19, 20). Like an end-time Elijah (Mal. 4:5, 6; cf. Matt. 17:11), the three angels make a final appeal to prepare for the great harvest, the coming of Jesus (Rev. 14:14–20).

Each message is of striking significance for those in environments hostile towards God, faith, and obedience. The first loudly proclaims God’s *eternal good news*; the second, *the fall of Babylon* (the trinity of evil); and the third, the choice all must make between damnation and deliverance. Adventists find identity in proclaiming these final appeals to the world. In both personal and public evangelism, we have sought to progressively unfold these truths to the world.

The flow

Within these messages can be found a certain flow or development. They move, as illustrated in figure 1, from the context, to gospel

proclamation, to Christian living. The heavenly messengers then challenge with distinctive doctrines, prophetic warnings, and the call to faithful witness and the multiplication of disciples.

how to pray, read the Bible, meditate, worship, experience family worship, participate in small groups, and introduce others to Jesus. Life concerns will be addressed: addictions, hurts,

turn, reach new people for God. The three angels represent God's people sharing their faith, and "their deeds will follow them" (Rev. 14:12, 13). In life and death, their witness multiplies. These are not simply the deeds at steps 4 and 5, but the witness of each step. Those bearing the three angels' messages are avid disciple makers: disciples making disciples who make disciples!

Figure 1. As reached, each step continues to be significant

- 1 relate to the context
- 2 tell the story of Jesus
- 3 live practical Christianity
- 4 explore doctrine
- 5 explore major prophetic themes
- 6 multiply disciples

This suggests a framework for mission, an order, or steps, for sharing:

Step 1—context. There is a sense in which evangelism starts with understanding the person's world context rather than with the message. Jesus mingled with people and instructed His disciples to do the same. The end-time Elijah message engages with common interests and meets people's needs: cultivating initiatives that alleviate suffering, transform communities, and heal broken relationships (Mal. 4:5, 6).

Step 2—gospel. Jesus' commission to share the "gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 24:14) and to make disciples of all (Matt. 28:18–20) is affirmed in the *sign* of end-time disciples proclaiming "the eternal gospel . . . to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people" (Rev. 14:6). Known for their love for Jesus, they prioritize the "eternal gospel"—salvation through Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–8).

Step 3—living. The first angel's message then moves to practical life concerns: "Fear God and give him glory" (Rev. 14:7). To *fear God* means to "hate evil . . . pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech" (Prov. 8:13). This calls us to live for God in end times, to shun the fearful deceptions and evil allures of the dragon, beast, and false prophet.

For those who have come to know Jesus (step 2), practical Christian end-time living (step 3) involves learning

brokenness, alienations, self-identity, forgiveness, family, children, sexuality, belonging, and trust, as well as other problems. Justice issues will arise. Many of the major questions of secular postmoderns need to be explored and responses initiated. This evangelism step, once reached, continues to be significant in the journey of Christian growth.

Step 4—doctrine. No dichotomy exists between Jesus and doctrine, or practical Christian living and doctrine. Steps 1–3 relate to our understanding of God, salvation, and life—doctrine. But there is progression. The messages move to address what could be called *distinctive doctrines*⁶: "The hour of (God's) judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev. 14:7).

Step 5—prophecy. Because many have a limited knowledge of God or His Word, little is gained from rushing to the major prophetic warnings of the second and third angels—concerning the fall of Babylon, the beast, his image, mark, and fate (Rev. 14:8–11)—before finding common ground, sharing Jesus, and cultivating practical Christian life values. These warnings are of vital significance but have more meaning and relevance when discussed with the heart concerns of listeners kept in mind.

Step 6—multiply. Good evangelism always equips new disciples, who, in

Practical implications of this framework

What are some implications of suggesting the three angels' messages provide a frame for mission?

First, it provides a structure for careful evangelistic instruction and progressive understanding. Once a person's spiritual interest has been cultivated through identifying with common concerns from the context of life and the world, the evangelistic task is to unpack God's last day message of Revelation 14:6–12.

Second, it provides a path that shows awareness of each person's journey but is not prescriptive. The significance of each evangelism step, for each person or group, is assessed. If committed believers, step 2 gospel discussions will be times of rejoicing in shared faith while reviewing Jesus' life-story and ministry—rather than weeks reading the Gospels and providing apologetic evidences for Jesus. However, if new to faith in Jesus, step 3 life discussions will involve teaching, modeling, and practicing Bible reading, prayer, family worship, and faith sharing—not to mention support through a myriad of life issues such as overcoming destructive addictions, finding healing for brokenness, offering forgiveness, and cultivating trust. Some steps might take significant time, but that will depend upon those with whom you are sharing.

There is an important implication for those engaged in public evangelistic preaching. In the past, public evangelists adjusted their topics as they progressed through their series of meetings. If it became evident that

a better foundation was needed before moving from one step to another, further evangelistic topics relative to that area were added. However, with the pressures of modern life, it has become necessary to reduce the number of meetings, and with the innovation of packaged presentations, the liberty to insert supplementary themes becomes limited. Unfortunately, in moving quickly to distinctive doctrinal and prophetic themes, steps 1–3 can be neglected or truncated, robbing the message of its appeal and transformative power. To ensure this does not happen, visitation must be a top priority.

At the same time, these six steps keep the evangelist moving forward. The task is not complete until all aspects of this end-time Elijah message are shared and explained. Each

(step 5), many of their friends will be *burned* by the experience and will never wish to hear more. We can use the six steps as points of reference for the development of new disciples—and, in turn, for their disciple making.

A framework for answering questions

Before responding to questions, it is a simple thing to ascertain the step of faith of the enquirer. If you are at step 1 (where you are seeking to understand and relate to the person's world) and the person asks a doctrinal (step 4) or major prophetic (step 5) question, we must answer in their context; i.e., step 1. For example, how could you respond if a person at step 1 asks: "Tell me, what do you think happens when a person dies?" This is a step 4 doctrinal question being asked by a

want to encourage you to read the Gospel of John, chapter 11, in the Bible." Explain how to find this—even downloading an easy to read Bible onto their phone or tablet—affirming: "This story explains what I believe happens at death. Read it, and the next time we meet, let me know what you discover and what you think." In this response you are introducing them to the gospel (step 2).

The same principles can be applied for all questions:

1. Ask questions to understand their context—their real reasons for asking.
2. Answer in the frame of their present step of understanding and growth.
3. Point to a story of Jesus relating to their question—encouraging discovery.

Adventists find identity in proclaiming these final appeals to the world.

step provides a foundation for what follows and, as reached, continues to be significant in the Christian journey. Adventism is not shaped alone by doctrinal (step 4) or prophetic understandings (step 5). Undergirding all is our relationship with Jesus Christ (step 2) and the values that shape our lives (step 3). However, steps 2 and 3, without steps 4 and 5, do not provide a full understanding of Revelation 14:6–12 either—and to neglect step 6 (*disciple making*) at each step further truncates this last-day, end-time message.

It is important that new disciples are provided with a simple framework for sharing faith and given instruction on how to share with family and friends at each step. If they wait to share when convicted of distinctive doctrines (step 4) or challenged with major prophecies

person with limited or no knowledge of Jesus Christ, Christian life, or biblical teachings.

Rather than providing a full Bible study on the state of the dead, a step 1 response might be a question: "Why do you ask—and what are your thoughts?" We have learned that few ask this question without a context. Has this young man had a friend killed in a work accident recently? Or, did this elderly lady lose a newborn baby 60 years ago? Or, has this young lady recently supported a friend through an abortion? This context and the person's understanding will inform your response. To neglect this and blithely quote Bible verses could destroy spiritual interest.

If the person persists in knowing your opinion, another step 1 response to this step 4 question might be: "I

4. Affirm your confidence in these biblical accounts—and in Jesus.
5. Inquire as to what they discover in reading the Bible story.

Even for questions within the frame of their present step of understanding, this approach fosters greater ownership of Bible discoveries.

Unique challenges and fresh opportunities

At first glance, this frame seems predicated upon control: share step 1 information until ready for step 2—and keep step 4 and 5 insights from them until they are prepared. To think that we could achieve this in our information-saturated world is unrealistic. As soon as people know we are Christian or Adventist, they surf the Internet—where there is no sequence


to the mix of related and unrelated information and misinformation.

Another challenge is the prevalence of post-Christian paganism. It is more difficult to witness to those who have rejected Christianity because of Christians acting more un-Christianly (religious wars, abuse, manipulative control, injustice, the accumulation of wealth, discrimination) than in pre-Christian pagan societies, where the name of Jesus and church seem unknown. Further, those shaped by postmodern thought will not suffer discrimination of any hue. And, for them, for a Christian to claim to have defined truth is the height of arrogance, and to point to the error of others is deemed defamatory.

Yet, this framework does not depend upon manipulation or control. Nor does it find its effectiveness

in invectives hurled at others, but suggests fresh possibilities, for it is about relationships. This is why step 1 (relating to their concerns) is so important. Read Jesus' instructions in Luke 10:8 and 9 again: listen to *their story*—as you eat together; let them experience *your story*—that their hearts might be prepared for *God's story*—for the kingdom is near. People are bombarded with information, but they make decisions with people whom they trust.

Within the circles of trusted friends, truth (and whether it works or not) is explored. This relational, experiential priority of our postmodern world offers prime opportunities but means connecting with people and their concerns. This is how Jesus shared His message—and, the flow of Revelation 14:6–12 affirms: “Christ’s method alone will give

true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”⁷ 

- 1 Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
- 2 Daniel R. Guild, “The Life and Work of J. L. Shuler,” *Ministry*, October 1972, www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1972/10/the-life-and-work-of-j.-l.-shuler.
- 3 J. L. Shuler, *Public Evangelism*, Review & Herald, 1939:78; emphasis by Shuler.
- 4 J. L. Shuler, *Evangelistic Lectures*, Review & Herald, 1950, members.impulse.net/~uhl/bible/eBooks/evangelistic_lectures.html.
- 5 Shuler, *Public Evangelism*, 1939:80.
- 6 Such as *hour of judgment* and *Sabbath* as introduced by the text; but also, examples like sanctuary, standards of Christian living, stewardship, state of the dead, second coming, and human destiny.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), 143.

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