

**RELATIONSHIP EVANGELISM IN TODAY'S MULTICULTURAL SETTING:
INTEGRATING CULTURE, BIBLE AND ADVENTISTISM**

By

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ABSTRACT

It takes an exceptional approach to witness successfully for God's love among today's people. This is so especially in view of the general social tendencies away from absolutes to relatives; from objectivity to subjectivity; from either/or to multiple choices; from slow pace to a fast paced society; from High Tech to High Touch; and from formalities to informalities. Hence, the way forward is a mingling method that identifies with the earnest aspirations of the next door neighbor, everywhere, anywhere, anytime, and in an informal manner through the natural courses of the Adventists' professional engagement in their daily living. This paper explores practical strategies for effectively integrating the Adventist faith with the professional practices of members in their day to day activities. It begins by looking at the concept of culture with its implications upon living faith, then, follows up by examining biblical interpretations/inspirations and the Adventists' position. It concludes with the dynamics of effective relationship evangelism within the postmodern cultural setting through integration of faith and vocations.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore the impact of the Adventists' perspective of biblical faith and culture on effective relationship evangelism via daily vocations in today's postmodern cultural setting. We shall begin by looking at the concept of culture with its implications on faith. Next, we look at the theology of biblical interpretations/inspiration and the Adventists' position and, conclude with the dynamics of employing professions for effective relationship evangelism within the postmodern context.

Culture Defined

What is Culture? Culture can be defined as a set of beliefs that shape one's worldview and response to his or her environment. Everybody has a culture and everyone is involved in culture. "Culture is everything, everywhere, all the time. It is the world of human meaning, the sum total of people's works... their vision of what it is to be fully human" (Kelvin Vanhouzer cited in Lael Caesar, 2012).

As believers, we exist to witness to every culture (see on Rev 14:6; Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18). And as Adventists, Culture is more than dressing and food, though as a people, they have their dressing and eating culture, etc. So on the so called cultural Sabbaths, they merely act out ethnic cultural dressings and foods which may not necessarily represent holistic Adventist culture.

Methods of biblical hermeneutics: a background

The literature reveals that diverse methods in interpreting the Bible exist-ranging from the allegorical methods which believe that the Scripture is figurative and has layers to be pilled as to

arrive at the true meaning, hence, the belief that laymen cannot read and understand it; to the literal methods, which see the Scripture as plain and easily understood. Between these two broad spectrums are numerous shades of hermeneutics including: (1) Feminist Hermeneutics, which says that the Bible needs to be revised because it is gender biased-God should not be addressed as “He” but “She”. Feminist hermeneutists are gender sensitive, believing that we are functionally created as male or female; (2) The “Liberal” view, which denies the full inspiration, authority, internal consistency, and trustworthiness of Scripture. Because the Bible is believed to be a fallible human document, it cannot always be trusted, this view employs the methodology of higher-criticism to interpret Scripture; (3) The “Fundamentalist” view (some refer to it as the “Ultra-Conservative” view)-which upholds the full inspiration, authority, internal consistency, and infallibility of Scripture, and a mechanical dictation or word-for-word mode of inspiration. This view tends to employ the “proof-text” method of interpretation, using an isolated text arbitrarily to prove one’s own point; (4) The Evangelical “Orthodox” view (also known as the Conservative view)-this view holds that the Bible *is* the inspired and authoritative Word of God, fully inspired, internally coherent, and trustworthy or dependable in whatever it teaches or touches upon; this view rejects the mechanical dictation view of inspiration (unless the text indicates so), and employs the plain reading method of interpretation (known technically as the grammatical-historical method); (5) The “Neo-Orthodox” view (sometimes referred to as the Barthian view, after Swiss theologian Karl Barth)-which holds that the Bible is not the Word of God, it only contains the Word of God or becomes the Word of God to individuals when it grips their hearts. It also employs higher-criticism to interpret Scripture; (6) The “Neo-Evangelical” or “Neo-Reformed” view (some call it the “Moderate Liberal” view)-which, while claiming to believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible on issues of salvation, is nonetheless

skeptical about the Bible's full inspiration, authority, authenticity and reliability on historical and scientific issues; this view employs modified aspects of higher criticism to interpret Scripture.

There are however, two major approaches to biblical interpretation into which I would like to classify all the above methods for the practical purpose of this work. They are Historical-Grammatical approach and Historical-Critical approach. Historical-Grammatical approach is precisely, one that has a high regard for the Scripture. It takes the authority of the Bible as unquestionable. The fundamental principles of this approach are embodied in what Davidson (1993) termed 'Hermeneutic Decalogue.' The Historical-Critical approach on the other hand, is one that has a low regard for the Bible. It does not see the Bible as a sole basis for arriving at the truth; rather, there are other sources of knowledge that should be delved into, like philosophy, culture, and so on. It does not see the Bible as being totally inspired-some came from God and some from human authors. One very damaging influence of Historical-Critical method is that it deifies reason above the Word of God. It applies mechanistic principles (or word for word mode of inspiration) to biblical interpretation and talks of Demytholization of the Bible, meaning that portions of the Bible are myths that never happened but are included to teach spiritual lessons.

Adventists' Biblical Foundation Defined/Explained

Building on the foregoing hermeneutical background, we proceed to discuss Adventists' hermeneutical foundation. Rodriguez (2005) says that "The way we understand revelation and inspiration, that is to say, the very nature of the Bible, will have a direct effect on our faith and practice, and on the role of the interpreter." Mueller (2000) agrees with Rodriguez by saying that "our understanding of the nature and content of Scripture shapes our perception of our Lord and

the grasp of discipleship”, which will in turn, “influence our selection of a hermeneutical method as well as the exegetical procedures we employ as we come to the Bible.” Furthermore, Mueller (2000) observes that “the mission of the church (evangelism) is dependent on the message of the church, which again, is dependent on how we perceive the nature and authority of Scripture.” Two approaches to the Bible exist. One is the verbal inspiration, which takes the Bible as totally divine with no human element. The other is the encounter approach, which does not see the Bible as God’s word; rather, it is seen as a witness to the experience of the human authors with God.

Adventists are a people of the Bible, the written Word of God. Hence, they adopt Historical-Grammatical approach in our biblical interpretations as given above, though there is a vocal minority that is critical of the Bible, whose activities have given rise to numerous hermeneutical issues throughout the history of the church. However, Davidson (1993) aptly captures the Adventist corporate attitude to hermeneutics in the following statement: “We come to the Scripture acknowledging our own biases and our pre-understandings, but we come willing and claim the divine promise that the Holy Spirit will bring our presuppositions ever more in harmony with the biblical suppositions.” Furthermore, Rodriguez (2005) contends that the Adventist “pioneers simply took for granted the traditional Protestant view of verbal inspiration” until 1882 when the church adopted the thought inspiration.

Thought inspiration, according to White (1883), maintains that revelation operates on the whole person infusing the human mind with divine thoughts. But by the 1950s thought inspiration was beginning to become the main position of the Adventist church. The first edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1966) stated that “we do not believe in verbal inspiration, according

to the usual meaning of the term, but in what may be properly called thought inspiration.” On the issue of revelation-inspiration, Fundamental Belief number one voted at the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Session in 1980 states:

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.

The foregoing historical antecedents are informative hindsight as to how Adventists approach their mission as a church in the context of today’s postmodern cultural milieu.

Culture and the Bible: The Relationship

Human culture determines our worldview about life generally. We interpret the Bible through our own worldview – doctrines of creation, salvation, sin, death, marriage, lifestyle, heaven, etc. “Biblical interpretation and culture are interwoven and almost inseparable competitors. Despite the transcendent authority of the faith, we read and live the Bible within human and social contexts” Lael Caesar (2012). But the converted believer will yield his culture to the supreme authority of the Bible.

Cultural Perspectives in Context

Types of cultural backgrounds include – ethnic, nationality, education, age bracket, gender, experience, orientation, vocation, career, training, religion, denomination, etc. Three Broad cultural milieus can be identified, namely - Pre-modern man – before the advent of

science/absolutes/Norms; Modern man – age of science/reason/scholasticism/humanism; and Postmodern man – age of metanarratives/everything goes/relativism. Of all three cultural groupings, postmodernism is most prevalent and has the most profound impact on our relationship evangelism today, and hence, more attention is given to it in this paper.

Postmodernism defined

Who are post moderns? What do they believe? How can we reach them? “Post” means “after”, and “modern” means “up to date” or “now”. So ‘postmodern’ means “beyond now”; they are living on the edge of constant change (Miroslav Pujic, 2013). We are postmoderns.

What post-moderns are not

They are not Secularists, Pluralists nor Contemporarists. Postmodernists do not necessarily deny God: they just don’t have any growing relationship with Him. They don’t reject the truth: they just don’t know where to find it and are not sure if the Bible has it. They are simply reacting to the failure of modernism, rejecting universally applicable truth and believe there is no way to ascertain absolute truth. Therefore, they value tolerance as a paramount virtue. They are largely relativists.

Opportunities for witnessing to postmoderns

Aleksandar Santrac (2010) says that

With the demise of absolute human reason and science, the supernatural is once again open to consideration because postmoderns see spirituality as closely connected to supernatural experience. Christian who have the Holy Spirit possess a great opportunity to make friends among postmoderns and share the story of a personal God who does miracles in their lives. This is achieved through the Christian biblical culture of agape

love. Love is the sum total of the Ten Commandments. Post-moderns are open to intuition and emotions and as they experience spiritual encounters, they will integrate into new lifestyles if they find somewhere they belong. So we have to give them a personal invitation through our biblical cultural living, saying, “Try it” ... i.e., the gospel. This should be our message to them. Post-moderns long to belong.

A Proposal For Cultural/Relational Evangelism: the need for new methods

Aleksandar Santrac (2010) proposes that “given today’s prevalence of the postmodern culture, the church must adopt new methods that will attract the postmodern mind. Richard Halverson as cited in Miroslav Pujic (2013) presents for us the following proposal for cultural/relational evangelism:

Dogmatism and faith are not identical: Dogmatism is like stone; faith is like soil.

Dogmatism refuses to admit doubts; faith often struggles with doubt... Dogmatism insists on proposition; faith knows (and loves like) Christ. Dogmatism generates bigotry; faith stimulates understanding. This does not mean that we dilute our message but an understanding that since Christianity preaches absolute truth, it is bound to be unpopular in postmodern setting. So, relational evangelism through biblical culture is the way forward.

Richard Halverson as cited in Pujic (2013) says that

Our gospel can never be irrelevant so long as there are hurting people who need to find peace in the divine gift of salvation. No compromise, rather we remain focused on relationship, support and nurture of the post-moderns. We must return to the basics: living out our biblical culture, developing authentic friendships, caring for practical needs

and giving postmoderns an opportunity to believe through belonging.” So the winning words are Relationship, Support and Nurture.

Three biblical principles of evangelizing the postmodern world

Miroslav Pujic (2013) offers three biblical principles for evangelizing the post-moderns. They are:

1. Belonging before believing: they seek genuine and honest relationship.
2. Process evangelism, rather than event: an enlarging circle of influence – from twelve disciples, as in Christ’s example, to the whole world, using what he called ‘‘Jimmy Long’s six steps of postmodern conversion’’ involving – discontentment with life; confusion over meaning; contact with Christians; conversion to community; commitment to Christ and a calling to God’s heavenly vision.
3. Narrative evangelism: your personal testimony – a story has the power to provoke thoughts, emotions, hope and actions. So share your story of how Christ came into your world and brought hope.

Cultural Diversity and Biblical Adventist Perspective/Responses

There are five types of Adventist responses to cultural diversity presented by Andy Crouch as cited in Aleksandar S. Santrac (Nov 2010):

1. Condemning culture: total rejection of some cultures such as violence, pornography, Homosexuality/gay marriage, discrimination, pollution, indecent dressing, etc.
2. Cultural equality: NO CULTURAL SUPREMACY, BUT OF EQUALITY.

3. Critiquing culture: evaluating cultures from biblical perspectives – music, dressing/adornment, literature, videos, etc. The probing question we ask is: Who inspired the culture – God or Satan; Bible or human tradition?
4. Copying culture: borrowing from every culture into the church and life - making self the center of worship rather than God. Copying is to be rejected. No compromise with non-biblical cultures.
5. Consuming culture: cultural goods that Christians just consume such as fast foods, clothes, music, videos, hair styles, doctrines, etc., without thinking about their values in the spiritual sense. We must maintain limitations, guided by the Bible and the Holy Spirit.

Culture and Biblical Witnessing/Shaping the Cultures

The Adventists' guiding principle is to preach the gospel in a way that will shape the culture and not the other way round. To illustrate this aspect of the discourse, let us use two broad cultural dimensions: Politics and Vocations. The Adventists' involvement in the political culture of the land is expected to emulate the worthy examples of biblical figures like Moses, Joseph, Esther, Modecai, the prophets, John the Baptist, the early disciples, etc. They all got involved in the politics of their days whenever necessary. Adventist should also get involved in politics of the day, but without compromising biblical culture. They should speak out, obeying God rather than man. The early Christians stood their grounds even in the face of imprisonment. Contemporary examples of politically related cultural challenges in Nigeria include - Saturday sanitation, election and exams, etc. There are some critical questions to ask. For instance, has the Adventist church ever petitioned Governments over these infringements to human rights of the Adventist?

Have Adventist members ever sacrificed their pleasure to risk mass imprisonment as to press home their rights to freedom of worship, examination and voting?

In addition to making positive impacts in politics, if in business or vocations they live as EXEMPLARY ADVENTISTS, there will likely be greater effectiveness in spreading the culture of Christ's Kingdom. Vocations or whatever you do – business, employment, academics, artisanship, etc., it should be remembered that the Adventist-Christian has no dual citizenship – they belong only to the heavenly kingdom. Therefore, whenever they are in contact with customers, colleagues or neighbors, they should prove to them that their services and work would be perfect – without delays, financial fraud or irresponsible excuses.

The result will likely be that they would have so many friends that they may not be able to cope with their spiritual thirst. All that is needed is simply to undertake their jobs faithfully and diligently while considering daily vocations as a tool for spreading the values of Christ's kingdom. Adventists need to advance everything they perform to the point of perfection not just because they want promotion, profit, fame or power, but because they love Jesus who has done so much for them.

Conclusion

Christians live to shape all cultures with the biblical culture. All cultures must be practiced with the Bible as a guiding principle: their cultural tastes must be aligned with the Biblical kingdom cultures lest they be left out (Rom 12:1, 2). We live in postmodern times with postmodernism as the prevalent culture: deny it and we fail. As a movement, Adventism must contextualize its evangelistic/worship strategies because though biblical cultural principles are unchangeable, methods are changeable. As individual Adventists, the appropriate approach to personal

evangelism must be contextualized so that they spread Christ's kingdom values through their vocations. They are "in the world but not of the world" (1 John 1: 16; John). Therefore, whether they "eat or drink or whatever they do", they must "do all to the glory of God" (1Cor 10:31).

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