**Apocalypse and the Public Square**

**A Theo-Philosophical Renovation of Premillennialism**

**by Charles Scriven**

Later Adventism, at least in its official version, has been, for the most part, a long refusal to emphasize or even to acknowledge the full meaning its own signature doctrines. The church leadership’s unwillingness to understand and embody the practical meaning of the Second Coming and the Sabbath, even when scholars have been offering helpful perspective for years, amounts, certainly, to spiritual malfeasance,[[1]](#footnote-1) and in light of this I will here attempt, once again,[[2]](#footnote-2) a biblically faithful renovation of Adventist Premillennialism, advancing this time a frame of mind I will call *prophetic apocalypticism*. The attempt will involve the Sabbath, and in this way, along with others, show how resources *within* the Seventh-day Adventist tradition—both from the church’s pioneers and also from later sources—illuminate a path toward (already discernible) spiritual reform.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Adventists of differing stripes share the conviction that God has called our community to endure as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.”[[4]](#footnote-4) My specific question is what, in light of Adventist Premillennialism, this may entail for our relationship to the Public Square, in particular to goings-on we may think of as “political.” By this adjective and by “politics,” the corresponding noun, I will be referring to the principles and human influence that go into the *organization* of society, and that undergird, in particular, its *governing* institutions? So another way to put my question is this: How should a community of hope, such as ours, understand its *political* responsibilities?

The term *premillennialism* gained scholarly prominence in the United States during the cultural upheavals (Darwinism, burgeoning immigration, higher criticism) associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some Christians adapted to these changes, seeing them as gifts toward further advance of the Kingdom of God. Others saw the changes as threats. After the story in Revelation 20 of a millennium, or thousand-year transitional period, that culminates in the full arrival of the Kingdom of God,[[5]](#footnote-5) the adaptors embraced “postmillennialism,” the view that the Second Coming of Christ occurs at the *end* of the millennium: the Second Coming would mark the climax of an epochal effort toward moral and spiritual transformation on earth. Other Christians, themselves pessimistic about earthly prospects, embraced “premillennialism,” the view that the Second Coming takes place *before* the millennium: the Second Coming would mark God’s judgment on fallen humanity and constitute the apocalyptic intervention without which there could be no hope of Christ’s victory on earth.

Official Adventism belongs in the latter category. Consider the preaching at the most recent (2015) General Conference session, where the meeting theme, proclaimed on a platform banner, was “Arise! Shine! Jesus is Coming!” Ten of the session’s 12 preachers offered deeply otherworldly interpretations of this theme, assuming that longer-term improvements of the human condition on earth are futile, and defining mission in a way consistent with the famous metaphor favored by premillennialist evangelist Billy Sunday: the world is a shipwreck and the church’s mission is to get as many people as possible into the Gospel lifeboat.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the work of later Adventist theologians, good examples of official premillennialist thinking are Raymond Cottrell’s essay, “The Eschaton: a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective of the Second Coming,” and Norman Gulley’s book-length study, *Christ is Coming*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Cottrell was a *Review and Herald* associate editor, and Gulley, who taught at Southern Adventist University, received pre-publication endorsement for his book from top church officials. In their different ways, both characterize the world as substantially unreceptive to human efforts toward betterment. As for involvement in “the political arena,” Gully specifically renounces it; both writers see a world getting “worse” (as Gulley puts it) rather than better.[[8]](#footnote-8)

But if we now attempt to compare the premillennialism of later official Adventism with that of the church’s pioneers, a story comes to light. Pioneer Adventism’s sense of these matters changed over time, and change *then* suggests the potential legitimacy of change *now*; the story discloses, as we might say, the advisability, or perhaps even necessity, of aspiration toward ever-deeper eschatological understanding.

The pioneer period[[9]](#footnote-9) began with Millerite indifference to earthly reform. People who would soon become Seventh-day Adventist leaders—at this point people uninterested in the Sabbath—welcomed William Miller’s prediction of imminent apocalyptic cataclysm. As 1844 approached, political institutions seemed so transient as to be irrelevant; long-range earthly concerns did not even matter. That is why Jonathan Butler, in his crucial telling of the story,[[10]](#footnote-10) calls this a period of “*apolitical*”apocalypticism.

Beginning in 1845, however, the most influential of our forebears began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Perhaps the Sabbath’s link to God as creator helped make the world more interesting. In any case, although they remained negative about earthly prospects—Uriah Smith believed slavery would last until the Second Coming—they did begin giving serious notice to the goings-on around them. But even though they were deeply critical of American society—of its slavery, its involvement in the Mexican War, its attempts at Sunday legislation—they felt, nearly all of them, that nothing could be done to change things for the better. Thus Butler characterizes the period from mid-1840s to the mid-1870s as one of “*political*”apocalypticism. Politics triggered interest and comment, but not reforming effort; only cataclysmic intervention, only the final coming of Christ, could make a difference.

By the 1870s Adventists had already begun investing in institutions focused on health and education. In the later 1870s, John Harvey Kellogg and Ellen White began to champion Adventist involvement with respect to temperance and Sunday legislation issues. For certain causes, at least, sheer pessimism about social reforms was softening. Early in the 1880s Ellen White even challenged young people at Battle Creek College to imagine that they could “sit in deliberative and legislative councils” and help to enact the nation’s laws. Butler invents the phrase “*political prophetic*” to characterize this new stage of Adventist development, alluding thereby to the Hebrew prophets, with their affirmation of divine creation and their passion for earthly justice and peace.[[11]](#footnote-11) But he also underscores a remaining ambivalence in Adventist thinking. Even if Adventists could make a positive social and political difference, such efforts would *eventually* fail; before Christ’s final victory—before heaven and earth could be apocalyptically renewed—things would assuredly get worse.

It seems, therefore, that “political prophetic” is a somewhat misleading description of the period that began in the 1870s. As Butler himself makes clear, Adventists remained apocalyptic in outlook even as the Hebrew prophets began to have greater influence. So it might be worthwhile to think of this as a period of (inchoate) *prophetic apocalypticism*. But if the Hebrew prophets seek moral change in the God-made here and now, and if apocalypticism concerns itself with the imminent, tumultuous victory of God and end of the world as we know it, what sense can the phrase convey? If the story of pioneer Adventism suggests an ideal of continuous aspiration toward deeper understanding, how might the phrase assist us toward a biblically faithful renovation of Adventist Premillennialism?

In an essay published in 1970, former Andrews University professor Edward W. H. Vick questioned conventional preoccupation with the “mapping” of end-time events, yet argued also that Adventism’s “distinctive contribution” to the larger Christian community is to remind it of the “importance of apocalyptic,” and to “represent adequately the apocalyptic interests of the biblical canon.”[[12]](#footnote-12) But the difficulty here concerns not only faithfulness to Scripture but also the sense, now widespread among the cultural elite, that the consolation offered by the gospel turns spiritual life into an escapist fantasy. If Christian faith comes down to navigating an escape from the world, it is a form of despair, a surrender to evil, a lapse into self-preoccupation. Twentieth-century novelist and moral philosopher Iris Murdoch remarks that secular critics see religion as a “soothing drug,” and says herself that insofar as religion offers some form of supernatural escape—insofar as it is not “demythologized”—it is morally corrupting.[[13]](#footnote-13) Telling the story of secularization, Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor remarks that humanists in general see their movement as superior to religion with respect to “maturity” and “courage.” Repeatedly since the Enlightenment they have accused religion, indeed, of what Taylor calls “childish pusillanimity.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

When a moral vision disengages people from earth’s difficulties—and so comes across cowardly and egoistic—it cannot withstand such criticism. Neither, however, can it withstand criticism based on the message of Bible. Official Adventism, the kind most members learn about in official settings and publications, is substantially[[15]](#footnote-15) a throwback to Butler’s *non-prophetic* apocalypticisms; with respect to the Public Square, it is precisely *disengaging*,and thus deeply vulnerable to both philosophical and biblical critique.

But even from the standpoint of philosophy, the fix may not be rejection of apocalyptic consciousness. Consider, for example, the manically prolific Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In a work called (!) *Living in the End Times*, he describes deficits and self-deception across the range of contemporary political perspectives. Communist regimes crush human freedom and fail to generate meaningful work for the citizenry. Capitalism idolizes material gratification while averting its gaze from exploitation, injustice and ecological crisis. In an earlier work, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for*? Žižek challenges the contemporary smugness that exalts “self-knowing and self-realization” and pursues human “rights” while overlooking sheer permissiveness and giving inadequate attention to human *needs*. And here he remarks, tellingly, that although uncoupling ourselves from the dominant surrounding order is “hard,” it belongs nevertheless to “the *work* of love.” The ordinary human point of view is a recipe for fiasco.[[16]](#footnote-16) All this calls to mind, of course, “the apocalyptic interests of the biblical canon,” the lurid accounts of spiritual and social crisis from which the faithful must distinguish themselves. Here, we might well say, a philosopher is calling his readers to apocalyptic consciousness.

But Žižek is proposing engagement, not disengagement; love, not withdrawal from difficulty. He does not invoke divine intervention, and so does not echo Scripture perfectly. But just here it is well to notice that if biblical apocalypses do speak of divine intervention, they also call for engagement—for participation in society (Daniel), for investment in the here and now (Matthew 24 and 25), for alignment with the faith of Christ and the spirit of the prophets (Revelation).

Insufficient consideration of the Hebrew prophets to whom Jesus himself was deeply indebted may account in part for any community’s slide toward the *disengaging* version of apocalypticism. In any case, if one part of the argument for *prophetic apocalypticism* is the relevance of radical critique and radical hope, another is the indispensability of these prophets. They deduced from Israel’s story, and from the conviction that God made both earth and us, a stance toward society proper to the faithful and symbolized in the gift of the Sabbath, with its reminder of creation’s goodness, of God’s action for the oppressed, and of the rest and humility befitting human creatures. This stance involves God-inspired analysis and action toward human flourishing. It means seeking justice, what is good for all, especially for the most vulnerable. It means pursuing peace, the welfare and security not only of our own communities but also of the wider world. And what is more, this stance is just what Jesus was commending when, in the only one of his Beatitudes that specifically addresses mission, he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” If attending to the prophets is important, so also, as it turns out, is attending to Jesus.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Armed with evidence and arguments I have offered so far, we may now, ever so briefly, characterize a properly renovated Adventist Premillennialism. As “premillennialist,” it will of course regard the second, or final,[[18]](#footnote-18) coming of Christ both as a divine judgment and also as the apocalyptic intervention without which there could be no hope of an entirely remade heaven and earth. But renovated premillennialism will utterly reject *disengaging* versions of apocalypticism, and so will adopt as its inviolable criterion what I am calling *prophetic apocalypticism*. Adventist Premillennialism will thus fall short whenever it is distracted from prophetic peacemaking as an essential feature of church mission. It will fall short when it assumes a stance of inevitable devolution, taking a darkly deterministic view of the future that renders nonsensical the biblical call to peacemaking. (Why would Jesus bid us to make peace, knowing it was pointless?) Premillennialism will fall short, too, when the urgency it inspires is fearful and warped by self-regard? Adventist Premillennialism will be faithful, on the other hand, when it reflects the whole Bible story, not least the Hebrew prophets who inspired Jesus. It will be faithful when it is both radical critique and radical hope, both a *voice* for, and an *actor* in, God’s transformative mission. Finally, it will be faithful when, in the spirit of the Sabbath, church members acknowledge human limitation and welcome the gift of rest as well as the work of love, so reminding themselves of their ultimate dependence on divine initiative.

One exception to my depiction of official Adventism was former General Conference president Jan Paulsen’s witness to peacemaking. He wrote that we Adventists “can’t walk away from our responsibility to stand in solidarity with the human plight.” “*We are peacemakers*,” he said in italics, adding that “we can’t be bystanders…complicit in evil.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Few Adventists would try to refute him. But if year after year official Adventism pays little or no attention to the point, how can it truly be said of us that we are complicit with good?

1. These claims should come across clear and well-justified in the course of the essay. As will also become clear, one exception is former General Conference President Jan Paulsen, who has given repeated notice to peacemaking. Against the flight from social responsibility that often attends the idea that the world is doomed and dying, he writes, for example, that “we can’t walk away from our responsibility to stand in solidarity with the human plight.” Then, in italics, he says: “*We are peacemakers*,” adding that “we can’t be bystanders…complicit in evil.” See his *Where Are We Going?* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2011): 59, 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One earlier attempt is “The Peacemaking Remnant: Spirituality and Mission for a People of Hope,” in Douglas Morgan, ed., *The Peacemaking Remnant: Essays and Historical Documents* (Silver Spring, MD: Adventist Peace Fellowship, 2005): 8-20, reprinted from *Spectrum* 27 (Summer, 1999): 67-73, where it had a different subtitle. I made the attempt again in *The Promise of Peace* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2009), in the chapters entitled “The Peacemaking Remnant” and “Pictures of the Kingdom Coming,” and still again in “Living Ahead: Justice and the Remnant,” in Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby, eds., *Do Justice: Our Call to Faithful Living* (Warburton, Australia:Signs Publishing, 2014): 77-83. Numerous other contemporary writers have offered re-interpretations of Adventist eschatology, including, for example, the late Roy Branson, who arguably pioneered the effort, as well as Gottfried Oosterwal, Sakae Kubo, John Brunt, Charles Teel, Jr., Douglas Morgan, Zack Plantak, Sigve Tonstad, Kendra Haloviak and Ron Osborn. Two collections of essays that bear on all of this are Roy Branson, ed., *Pilgrimage of Hope* (Takoma Park: Association of Adventist Forums, 1986) and Charles Teel, Jr., ed., *Remnant and Republic* (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University Center for Christian Bioethics, 1995). Another is the aforementioned *Do Justice*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a recent *Spectrum* website interview, “John Brunt Reflects on 50 Years of Ministry,” Alita Byrd asked Brunt about changes in church life that he has noticed, and he replied in part, “There is less preoccupation with trying to figure out when Christ will come and more with living the Kingdom now. We have recognized that we prepare people for the Second Coming not by scaring them with beasts but by inviting them to commit their lives to Jesus and His mission to bring the values of God’s Kingdom ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’” Brunt’s perspective suggests that recent scholarly work has begun, at least here and there, to affect Adventism at the congregational level. See <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/11/01/john-brunt-reflects-50-years-ministry>. Accessed November 8, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Revelation 14:12, NRSV (as always in this essay). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In theological scholarship the adjectives “millennial” and “millenarian” are basically interchangeable. The former is from the Latin words *mille*, “one thousand,” and *annus*, “year” (hence the two *n*’s). The latter is from the Latin *millenarius*, “containing a thousand (of anything).” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This past summer I reported on General Conference preaching for the *Spectrum* website, attending every preaching service. These reports are available on the website, along with my concluding analysis, “Half-Discipleship: General Conference Adventism’s Truncated Bible,” which can be accessed at <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/07/24/half-discipleship-general-conference-adventism%E2%80%99s-truncated-bible>. A recent discussion of evangelical premillennialism is Matthew Avery Sutton’s *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.) Sutton discusses the Billy Sunday metaphor on p. 116. Throughout the book he notes that evangelical premillennialist fervor did, paradoxically, have certain societal impacts, such as with respect to American attitudes concerning science, capitalism and the state of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cottrell’s essay appeared in *Spectrum* 5 (Winter 1973):7-31. Gulley’s book was published in *Hagerstown*, MD, by the Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1998, and endorsers included the editor of the *Adventist Review* and a former president of the General Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gulley, Ibid., 441, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I this take this period to stretch from roughly 1844 to roughly 1915, the year of Ellen White’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jonathan M. Butler, “Adventism and the American Experience,” in Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974): 173-206. I am here summarizing Butler’s account. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For prophetic conviction about divine creation, see, for example, Isaiah 45:18; for examples of passion for justice, see Amos 5:14, 15 (where the prophet implies that the “remnant” make an effort toward justice), and also Isaiah 1:12-18, 42:1-4, and 58:1-14; on the obligation to, and promise of, peace (or sweeping wholeness and flourishing), see Isaiah 54:10, Jeremiah 29:5-7, and Ezekiel 34:25-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Edward W. H. Vick, “Observations on the Adventism of Seventh-day Adventists,” a chapter in Vern Carner and Gary Stanhiser, eds., *The Stature of Christ* (Loma Linda, CA: privately printed festshrift in honor of Edward Heppenstall, 1970): 200, 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On all this see, for example, chapters 14-16 of Murdoch’s *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); the phrase “soothing drug” appears on p. 481. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MS: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007): 365, 565. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One exception to this generalization is religious liberty. That issue covers an important but narrow band of the political concern pertinent to human flourishing. I have already implied, of course, that some contemporary pastors and writers, usually ones who are marginal with respect to official Adventism, have also borne exceptional witness on this front. Let me also acknowledge that “official” statements from church entities do occasionally address some of what I am speaking about here, but they remain buried on websites that go largely unnoticed at the popular level. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I depend here on the Introduction, especially pp. 4-7, and on first chapter of Žižek’s, *Living in the End Times* (London and New York: Verso, 2010); and on his *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (New York: Verso, 2000): 126-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the spirit of the prophets, see passages enumerated above, in footnote 11. Jesus’ remark on peacemaking is from Matthew 5:9, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount; official Adventism never, to my knowledge, makes this remark a prominent element in its understanding of church mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. According to the New Testament, Christ comes the first time and then comes repeatedly through the presence of the Holy Spirit (see John 14 and 16; also Romans 8). This fact would be easier to keep in mind if we spoke, in reference to Christ’s ultimate victory, of his “final” rather than his “second” coming. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See footnote 1, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)