Adventism in the Public Square:
A Model from Paul's Areopagus Speech
(Acts 17:16-34)

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Introduction

When Paul arrived in Athens during his second missionary journey "his spirit was provoked within himself" (παρωξύνετο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ; 17:16)[1] as he saw that the city was a veritable forest of idols. Daily he reasoned (διελέγετο) in the synagogue with Jews and Gentile God-fearers and in the marketplace with those who happened to be present.[2] Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate (συνέβαλλον; 17:18) Paul, accusing him of being "a babbler" (ὁ σπερμολόγος; 17:18).[3] They puzzled over his proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection, believing he was preaching "foreign divinities" (ξένων δαιμονίων; 17:18); they took hold of him and led him to the Areopagus, wanting to understand the nature of his preaching because he was bringing "some strange things" (ξενίζοντα τινα) into their hearing.[4]

Paul stood up in the midst of the Areopagus and noted the Athenians were "very religious/superstitious" (δεισιδαιμονεστέρους; 17:22). As he examined their objects of worship, he noticed an altar in which it was inscribed, "To an unknown god" (Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ. 17:23). The apostle utilizes this altar as an entry point to his speech and declares, "Therefore, what you worship unknowingly/ignorantly (ἀγνοοῦντες;

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, scriptural translations are my own.

[2] Luke depicts Paul as a Socrates figure, evoking his life, trial, and death in Athens (C. K. Barrett, *Acts 15 – 28*. ICC [London: T & T Clark, 1998], 824; Joshua W. Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as Both Critique and Propaganda." *JBL 131* (2012): 570-574; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*. SP [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992], 312; Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Acts 15:1 – 23:35* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 2580, 2603-2612; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*. TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 283; C. Kavin Rowe, "The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition." *NTS 57* (2010): 38-39.

[3] "The word translated babbler *(spermalogos)* was originally used of seed-eating or scavenging birds and meant 'picking up seeds.' Metaphorically, it was applied to people who obtained scraps of information from others and retailed them as their own. So they were accusing Paul of being an ignorant plagiarist and a religious charlatan" (David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*. PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 490.

[4] There is considerable scholarly debate as to whether the events starting with 17:19 should be interpreted as a court trial or a philosophical discussion. For an analysis of the issues, see Keener, 2600-2612.

Act 17:23), this I proclaim to you." Paul proceeds to critique Athenian religion by highlighting three important theological truths, which seek to establish God's claim upon all of humanity.[5]

The truth about God (17:24-25). God is Creator and Lord of heaven and earth and does not dwell in temples made by humans. He is completely independent of humanity, not needing to be served by human hands. He is the source and sustainer of all life, "granting to everyone life and breath and all things" (διδοὺς πᾶσι ζωὴν καὶ πνοὴν καὶ τὰ πάντα · Act 17:25).[6]

The truth about Humanity (17:26-29). From one man God created nations to dwell across the earth, "having determined their appointed times and the fixed boundaries of their dwelling places" (ὁρίσας προστεταγμένους καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν; Act 17:26). God implanted a desire within humanity to seek after him, as "he is not far from each one of us" (καί γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα. Act 17:27). Even Greek poets have noted humanity's dependence upon God by asserting, "in him we live and move and have our being" (ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν; Act 17:28) as well as the fact that "we are his offspring" (τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν. Act 17:28). Since humanity is the offspring of God, one should never believe he could be represented in the form an idol (17:29).[7]

The truth about Divine Judgment (17:30-31). The times in which God disregarded (ὑπεριδὼν; Act 17:30) humanity's ignorance (ἀγνοίας; Act 17:30) are over; he now commands all of mankind, everywhere, to repent. Repentance is necessary because God has established a day in which he will judge the world through his appointed agent, Jesus. God's raising Jesus from the dead (ἀναστήσας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν. Act 17:31) gives assurance of the eschatological judgment.[8]

Through the centuries, interpreters have struggled to ascertain the purpose of the Areopagus speech, evidenced by the variety of interpretative proposals. Scholars who underscore the speech's connections to Greco-Roman philosophy view it "as a placid pantheistic sermon on natural theology;"[9] those who emphasize its connection with Israel's scriptures, see it "as a scathing demonization of Gentile religion."[10] Is the apostle a brilliant accomodationist translating Christian theology into Gentile

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[5] Peterson, 493.

[6] Ibid, 495-496.

[7] Ibid, 496-501.

[8] Ibid, 501-503.

[9] Jipp, 567. For this view, see Martin Dibelius, "The Speeches in Acts and Ancient Historiography." In *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM, 1951), 138-185.

[10] Jipp, 567. For this view, see Bertil Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1955).

philosophical terms? Or is he a radical critiquer who utilizes anti-idol Old Testament texts to challenge the conspicuous idolatry of Athenian religion?

In order to comprehensively account for the speech's themes, it seems best to posit a twofold agenda for the speech:

- To narrate the complete incongruity between the Christian movement and Gentile religion – an incongruity exemplified by the speech's critique of Greco-Roman religiosity, anti-idolatry polemic, and its theologically exclusive claims;
- To exalt the Christian movement as comprising the best features of Greco-Roman philosophical sensibilities and therefore as a superior philosophy.[11]

The speech is thus both conventional and radical. "It is conventional in that the topics of monotheism, critiques of temples and sacrifices, the unity of humankind and the like would have resonated with Greco-Roman philosophical sensibilities. The speech is radical in that it co-opts – one might say takes over and transforms the cultural script – the best aspects of Hellenistic philosophy and claims that they can be found *only* in the Christian movement."[12]

We now ask: how might this speech provide a model for the Adventist church to engage the public square? Which features of our post-modern culture and ideology (North America) might we critique and co-opt, transforming them by the claims of the Christian faith?

The Religious Landscape of America

Recent research carried out by the Pew Research Center discloses significant changes occurring in the religious landscape of America.[13] Of the five key findings of the Pew Research, perhaps the most striking is the increase in the number of religious "nones" – Americans with no religious affiliation,[14] who frequently describe themselves as, "I am spiritual but not religious."

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[11] Jipp, 568.

[12] Ibid.

[13] http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[14] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/5-key-findings-u-s-religious-landscape/. Of the many findings from the Pew Research, Michael Lipka argues there are five key ones: (1) Christians are declining, both as a share of the U.S. population and in total number (from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2015); (2) the biggest declines have been in the mainline Protestant tradition and among Catholics; (3) there is a continued rise in the share of Americans with no religious affiliation (religious "nones") (from 16.1% in 2007 to 22.8% in 2015); (4) the major trends seen in American religion since 2007 – the decline of Christians and the rise of the "nones" – have occurred in some form across demographic groups; (5) the share of Americans who identity with non-Christian faiths, such as Islam and Hinduism, has grown modestly (from 4.7% in 2007 to 5.9 % in 2015) (Ibid).

These religiously unaffiliated Americans seek authentic religious experiences and have diverse notions of spirituality. Linda Mercadante, in her recent book, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*, sought to discover the nature of the nones' spirituality by interviewing 80 self-professed "I'm spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) persons.[15] These nonaligned persons typically reconfigured traditional Christian beliefs into alternative themes. Mercadante's interviews of nones reveal a profound spiritual sea-change taking place in America, perhaps uncovering an emerging post-Christian spirituality. Her interviews were focused in the following areas:

Transcendence
The concept of God is altered by nones from a transcendent being "into the sacred or divine self." God's freedom and sovereignty "becomes instead readily accessible, even impersonal, divine energy to be used by the individual as he or she sees fit, with progress nearly guaranteed." The Spirit is no longer one of the persons of the trinity; rather the Spirit is "a self-generating personal intuition." Jesus is not to be understood as a savior figure since aid for personal growth and healing can be found in multiple guides.[16]

The God-human relationship
Instead of trusting God, nones trust their own inner voice that provides them with all the answers they need. Prayer is no longer understood to be asking God for one's needs but "becomes instead self-generated positive thinking." Instead of "divine rewards or punishments, or unearned grace, now both beneficial and harmful outcomes are 'attracted,' thus becoming one's own doing or fault because the results are produced by one's own thought patterns."[17]

The world is shaped by "an impersonal law of karma which inexorably rules, with no grace possible," obviating the need to construe the world as shaped by God's mercy and justice. "Guidance, no longer mediated through congregation, tradition or God, becomes instead self-guidance ideally unaffected by external authority." This self-guidance is supported, to some degree, by nones capacity to tap into some kind of ancient wisdom, typically a contemporary construction.[18]

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[15] Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-19.

[16] Ibid, 232; see also, 92-125. Many nones rejected *the masculine imagery of God* "such as the demanding, difficult-to-satisfy father, or the capricious king who could just as well smite you as help you." (Ibid, 95). Also problematic was *the notion of a personal, interventionist, and caring God.* As one interviewee said, "I don't like the word God because it's so loaded . . . Although . . . I do believe that there is something that is, that we are all connected to . . . something bigger than us . . . [But is this] something outside of us, controlling what we're doing? No. Not into it, not down with it" (Ibid, 99). Another said, "I think we're on our own. I don't think it's rooting for us or pulling strings for us or anything. I think that's a childlike vision of reality" (Ibid).

[17] Ibid, 232.

[18] Ibid, 233.

The sin-salvation paradigm

The new ethos of the nones does not view sin "as an offense against God" but as a "violation of the authentic self." This violation of the self is a result of "ignoring one's higher or inner truth." The notion one must get right with God (i.e., justification) is replaced by a striving for harmony with "one's own inner integrity." The idea that God needs to change and to purify our lives (i.e., sanctification) is supplanted by a journey of transformation of the self and ongoing improvement and growth. The concept of holiness is displaced by notions of psychological healing.[19]

Community

Nones are less interested in participating in traditional religious communities and quite critical of them.[20] The gifts of the Spirit, which God utilizes to edify and build the church, "become instead sacred power tools for the ongoing construction or revealing of the true self." Communal worship to praise and glorify God is replaced with practices to transform the self. The beliefs and practices of a religious group along with its concomitant authority are "transposed into personal experience as final authority, with desire and passion as fuel."[21]

Instead of an ongoing commitment to a particular religious group, nones prefer "ongoing experimentation with flexible, changing affiliations." The shared belief system of a religious community is replaced by "shared lifestyles or practices, which can be changed or supplanted on an as-needed basis."[22]

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[19] Ibid. Reacting to the impression that Christianity teaches the depravity of humanity, nones believe *humans are inherently good*. One agnostic none reflected: "I think that people have incredible potential for unbelievable good. I think that the little child is born in goodness" (Ibid, 130; italics mine). Some nones believe *humanity is not only good but divine*: "the notion that we're all God means that we all are microcosms of the macrocosm, that if I were attuned enough, I could connect with all the information in that universal body of intelligence, across time and space" (Ibid, 135; italics mine). Many nones struggle with notions of good and bad, striving to *avoid value judgments:* "It's not good, it's not bad. People just do things that are not always beneficial for everyone that they are with, so in that regard that could be defined as good or bad. My preference is to try to not put those definitions on people" (Ibid, 137; italics mine). Some nones underscore *humanity's freedom and free will* to shape the course of their lives: "I think that humans are potential. The potential manifests itself within a certain set of circumstances in which all of us are born. In that sense we come into a world that is very difficult, but I believe that we have ongoing choices of responses. I would not say humans are inherently selfish or loving; I would say they have choices" (Ibid, 145; italics mine).

[20] Ibid. Nones typically are *fearful and distrustful of religious groups*, tending to avoid them altogether: "When I think of going to a community, I think of them making demands on me and my work and my family and my marriage life. It's life draining. I haven't found a community that nourishes" (Ibid, 163-164). Nones see *spirituality as an individual pursuit*, which does not need the support of group membership: "I don't think you have to be in a church to be spiritual. You can have your own relationship with God, or higher power . . . that is more important than anything else you believe . . . I am more spiritual than religious because I don't really need to go to somebody's service and have people's rules" (Ibid, 164-165).

[21] Ibid, 233.

[22] Ibid.

Afterlife

Most nones reject the Christian belief of a blissful heaven and torturous hell. They find such notions to be immature, sick, and manipulative, engendering a false hope[23]; the simplistic depictions of heaven and hell also seem exclusivist and unfair since they posit that God will someday consign some humans to heaven and others, hundreds of millions to hell.[24] The classic Christian understanding of eschatology with a final destination is rejected and transposed into an endless journey of self-improvement, "often through multiple lives or multiple realities."[25]

Summary

The foregoing theology of the nones can be construed as detraditioning – "a revoking of religious authority in favor of personal decision."[26] Its central tenets are captured by Mercadante's summary:

> This ethos [of the nones] includes an impersonalization of transcendence, a sacralization of the self, a focus on therapeutic rather than civic goals, and a self-needs orientation to community and commitment. To do this, concepts borrowed from non-Western religions (such as monism and reincarnation) or those borrowed from psychology, science, or alternative philosophies (such as positive thinking, 'cellular' knowledge, energies, self-realization) are equally simplified, homogenized, or altered, and then brought in as alternatives . . . a portion of this rhetoric, as well as some of its particulars, can be found inside as well as outside religion.[27]

Mercadante also summarizes the positions disavowed by the majority of nones:
- An exclusivism that rejects all religions but one's own;
- A wrathful and/or interventionist God;
- A static and permanent afterlife of glorious heaven and torturous hell;
- An oppressively authoritarian religious tradition;
- A non-experiential repressive religious community; and
- A view of humans as "born bad."[28]

The theology of the nones is illustrative of the smorgasbord of spiritualties found in American culture today. In many ways, the contemporary religious landscape in America is similar to that of 1st century Athens where Paul walked through a forest of idols dedicated to pagan deities and noted the Athenians were very religious, that is, quite spiritual.

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[23] Ibid, 196-199.
[24] Ibid, 202-204.
[25] Ibid, 233.
[26] Ibid, 230-231.
[27] Ibid, 231.
[28] Ibid, 230.

What might Paul say to the spirituality of the nones? What features of the Areopagus speech might help us to contextualize the gospel to their theology and worldview?

Paul Engages the Public Square
The Areopagus Speech and the theology of the Nones
Paul's cultural sensitivity to Athenian Spirituality

Paul's response to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers is instructive.[29] His speech affirms their interest and openness to spirituality; he notes how extremely religious they are in every respect and quotes poetry from two pagan authors.[30] The language of his speech contains elements that resonate with philosophical traditions regarding temple worship, sacrifices, and images.[31] Additionally, philosophical resonances can be found in the concepts of the unity of humankind, humanity's desire for God, and God's nearness to humanity.[32] Paul thus respectively engages the Athenians' spirituality "drawing upon indigenous language, images and concepts to communicate the gospel in culturally relevant forms."[33]

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[29] Epicurus (342 – 270 BC), the founder of Epicureanism, believed "that pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death" (Richard Longenecker, "Acts." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Revised Edition. Edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 981). He believed the gods were completely uninterested and uninvolved in the affairs of humanity (Ibid; see also Barrett, 829; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*. ANTC [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003], 248; Peterson, 490). Religious piety was therefore unwarranted as it was ridiculous to believe it was necessary to bring sacrifices to a deity localized in a temple (Peterson, 490; see also Barrett, 829; Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*. AB Vol. 31 [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 605; Gaventa, 248). Zeno (340 – 263 BC), the founder of Stoicism, focused his teaching "on living harmoniously with nature and emphasized humanity's rational abilities and individual self-sufficiency. Theologically, he was essentially pantheistic and thought of God as the 'World-soul'" (Longenecker, 981). Humans ought to live in accordance with the indwelling divine being (Barrett, 829), cultivating "human virtue as the means to achieving one's goals and achieving independence from the control of passions" (Gaventa, 248; see also Peterson, 490).

[30] In order to support his teaching about the nature of humanity, Paul quotes from two pagan poets. The first quote comes from the Cretan poet Epimenides (ca. 600 BC). The phrase, "for in him we live and move and have our being" (17:28), is articulated by Zeus' son, Minos, in a poem entitled *Cretica*:

> They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one
> The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
> But thou are not dead; thou livest and abides for ever,
> *For in thee we live and move and have our being*

(Longenecker, 984 [italics mine]; see also F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*. NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 359. There is considerable scholarly debate as to whether this quotation can be attributed to Epimenides. For a careful assessment of the issues see Keener, 2657-2659). The second quote comes from the Cilician poet Aratus (ca. 315 – 240 BC). The phrase, "for we are also his offspring," is found in one of the lines of his poem entitled, *Phaenomena* 5 – "It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, *for we are also his offspring* (Longenecker, 984 [italics mine]; see also Barrett, 848; Bruce, 360; Fitzmyer, 611; Gaventa, 252; Jipp, 584; Keener, 2659-2660; Peterson, 499).

[31] Jipp, 576-581.

[32] Ibid, 581-586.

[33] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 82.

Cultural sensitivity to the Nones
We must likewise respectively engage the nones' spirituality, appropriating the language, images, and concepts that have shaped their ethos so that we might establish points of contact to begin a conversation. On the basis of the Areopagus speech, we *can affirm* the nones energetic and keen interest in spirituality; their desire for a life filled with meaning and purpose; their longing to discover something that will satisfy spiritual hunger; and their strong desire to seek transformation and growth.

We can also affirm the nones openness to participating in human community; their interest in the unity of humanity (e.g., 17:26-27), exemplified in their passionate desire for social justice, universal generosity, and concern for human rights; and finally, we can affirm their interest in individual freedom and stress on the importance of personal choice (e.g., 17:27a).

Paul's Critique of Athenian Spirituality
At the same time, Paul critiques the Athenians' spirituality. He confronts their ignorance and idolatry by incorporating pagan philosophical traditions "into a radically different overall interpretative framework: the biblical story that stretches from Adam to the return of Jesus Christ."[34]

The speech's resonances with Israel's Scriptures *and* pagan philosophy can be seen with its critique of Athenian obsession with novelty (17:21); its criticism of Athenian piety (17:22-23), temple worship, sacrifices, and images as superstitious (17:24-25); its criticism of the Athenians failure to obtain a knowledge of God due to their ignorance as they grope after God unsuccessfully, notwithstanding his nearness and beneficence toward them (17:26-27); and in its criticism of outright Athenian idolatry (17:28-29).[35]

Critiquing the spirituality of the Nones
These theological perspectives also confront the spirituality of the nones. Instead of understanding divine *transcendence* as an "impersonal, divine energy to be used by the individual as he or she sees fit, with progress nearly guaranteed,"[36] nones must be challenged not to conceive of spiritual reality as an impersonal force, because "for Paul, this unknown spiritual reality is a personal and living God who can be known . . . and who seeks us out."[37] And this living God is sovereign Lord, Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of all nations.

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[34] Rowe, 43.

[35] Jipp, 574-586. Jipp notes the speech's resonances with the vocabulary of Israel's Scriptures, particularly the anti-idolatry rhetoric. Yet he also quotes numerous pagan writers, such as Cicero, Lucretius, Epictetus, Plutarch, Seneca, and others, to underscore its striking resonances with pagan philosophy.

[36] Mercadante, 232.

[37] Alistair McGrath, *The Unknown God: Searching for Spiritual Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 71.

Instead of reliance upon one's own inner resources, a kind of self-guidance in a journey of transformation of the self, which inexorably moves toward *a sacralization of the self*, nones must recognize the idolatrous dimensions of their lifestyle. The divine origin of humanity ("offspring of God") underscores our creatureliness and thus precludes understanding the "Divine Nature . . . as an image of the art and imagination of man (τὸ θεῖον . . . χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου; Act 17:29). To be the offspring of God is "to be children of the Living God who reject the confusion between Creator and creature."[38] Moreover, the nones sacralization of the self brings with it the inevitable likelihood they will fail to attain a true knowledge of the living God. "While God has overlooked the times of ignorance, he now commands all men, everywhere to repent" (17:30), a bold declaration that knowledge of God is only achieved when one moves into and inhabits "the way of life constituted by repentance and the recognition of the identity of the man who was raised from the dead."[39]

Instead of a "*self-needs orientation toward community and commitment,*" an orientation that cultivates the inner life and self-transcendence possibilities, a kind of self-guidance unaffected by any kind of external authority, nones must recognize their lives need to be configured around Scripture's claim "about the ultimate origin and destiny of humanity: human beings, created by the God of Israel, now find their *telos* – in every significant sense of the word – on a particular day and in relation to a particular man."[40] Nones must thus come to the realization their lives must be *patterned and oriented* toward the eschaton.[41]

Adventism and the Public Square

The foregoing contextualization of the Areopagus speech toward the ethos of the nones is illustrative of how the speech can function as a model for the Adventist church to proclaim the gospel in a complex world characterized by postmodernism, an ideology that resists grand narratives, advocating an "incredulity towards metanarratives."[42] Indeed, Paul's nuanced response to Athenian religion has a paradigmatic character and is "a classic of intercultural communication applicable to our own increasingly

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[38] Rowe, 45. Rowe maintains "humanity's divine origin actually testifies to the break between God (Creator) and world (creature) and, hence, excludes are ability to image God. Inasmuch as humans are the living offspring of the living God, we cannot image him (esp. vv.28-29)" (Ibid).

[39] Ibid, 45. Rowe argues there is a "collision between the Christian habitus and (locally) antecedent pagan traditions" which highlights "the difference in the total configuration of life that emerges out of conflicting claims to truth about the ultimate origin and destiny of humanity" (Ibid). Likewise, there is a collision between the theological perspective of the Areopagus speech and the ethos/worldview of the nones.

[40] Ibid, 46.

[41] Ibid (italics mine).

[42] Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

pluralistic world."[43] I believe the Adventist church can draw the following lessons from the speech:

Adventism must innovatively and adventurously engage the Public square with cultural awareness and a willingness to contextualize the gospel to the postmodern world

Just as Paul was culturally aware of his pagan world, *the Adventist church must also be culturally aware of our contemporary postmodern world.* We must have a knowledge of the contemporary films, television programs, music, literature, and the beliefs and practices of religious groups found in North America which have influenced and shaped postmoderns because "the church must always sensitively listen to the culture in which it ministers and draw upon that culture's internal resources if it hopes to proclaim the gospel in a credible and convincing way."[44] Or as Karl Barth was supposed to have said, "One must hold the Bible in one hand, and the daily newspaper in the other."[45]

Since Paul contextualized the proclamation of the gospel to his audience, whether they were Jewish (Acts 13:13-52), Christian (Acts 20:17-35), or pagan (Acts 17:22-31), in a ministry which was centered in the major cities of the Greco-Roman world, the Adventist church must likewise proclaim the gospel in the major cities of America with a contextualized message, crafted toward the underlying ethos of such cities like New York, Los Angeles, Boston, etc. We must ask, which aspects of this city's culture and internal resources can the church appropriate to use as entry points to begin a dialogue to share the gospel? How are the universal desires for transcendence and intimacy expressed uniquely in these cities, that is, its altars to the "unknown god," which the church must be culturally aware of so that it can establish an intercultural entry point to share the gospel?

A few years ago the Adventist church blanketed New York city with copies of the *Great Controversy*[46] in preparation for its "Mission to the Cities, New York 2013."[47] How might the Areopagus speech inform such an evangelistic endeavor in the large and massively complex city of New York? Did the church sensitively draw upon the indigenous culture of New York city and communicate the gospel in culturally relevant forms? Did the church proclaim the gospel in a credible and convincing way? Ellen

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[43] Colin Hemer, "The Speeches of Acts. The Areopagus Address." *Tyndale Bulletin 40* (1989): 255.

[44] Flemming, 82.

[45] The Barth Center at Princeton Theological Seminary has been unable to find this exact quotation. It appears Barth occasionally did make similar remarks. In a Time Magazine piece on Barth published in May 31, 1963, the magazine stated: "[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible'" (http://www.ptsem.edu/Library/index.aspx?menu1_id=6907&menu2_id=6904&id=8450).

[46] http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/asi-member-blankets-new-york-with-%E2%80%98the-great-controversy%E2%80%99

[47] http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story2879-calculating-the-success-of-new-york%E2%80%99s-2013-evangelistic-series.

White said that Paul "showed himself familiar with their [Athenians] works of art, their literature, and their religion."[48] In its NY2013 evangelistic outreach, did the Adventist church show itself familiar with the city's works of art, literature, culture, its distinguishing character and ethos?

Adventism must respectively and intelligently engage the Public Square by challenging postmodernism – particularly its hostility toward metanarratives, with a well-crafted, culturally informed, proclamation of Scriptures' metanarrative

The theological perspectives of the Areopagus speech, its metanarrative, disclose a number of nonnegotiable biblical concepts that directly challenge the spiritually of postmoderns: "the sovereign lordship of the Creator and Ruler of the nations (which means there are no other gods), the universal need for repentance (which presupposes sin and guilt), the reality of a future judgment (which implies moral accountability) . . . [and] the supreme revelation of God in Christ, validated by Jesus' resurrection from the dead (which flies in the face of Greek notions of death and immortality)." [49]

This metanarrative from Scripture must shape our engagement with postmoderns. Just as Paul took over and transformed the cultural script of Athenian religion and philosophy, likewise, the Adventist church must co-opt features of postmodern sensibilities and incorporate them into Scripture's grand metanarrative which stretches from creation to the return of Jesus. Surely the impulses of transcendence – a sense there is more to reality than the material world as well as the longing for intimacy – a profound human thirst for community, meaning and purpose, can be co-opted by the church and incorporated into the metanarrative of God's gracious reconciling work through his son Jesus on behalf of humanity (2 Cor 5:18-19).

Paul declares humans were created to "seek God" (ζητεῖν τὸν θεόν; Act 17:27), and that the Gentiles "are groping after/feeling about for him and might find him"(εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὕροιεν, Act 17:27), though "he is not far from each one of us" (καί γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα. Act 17:27). The portrait sketched is of an omnipresent God who is not far from any person; yet, "ironically human beings are stumbling around in the dark trying to find God."[50]

As postmoderns "grope after" and "search about" for God, the church must find innovative ways to bring them into an encounter and knowledge of the living God so that they might cease "fumbling about"; they might cease being fearful of a meaningless life and the prospect of death; they might cease wondering, "Where is

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[48] Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 237.

[49] Flemming, 82-83.

[50] Ben Witherington III, *Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 529.

God?"[51] Perhaps the Adventist church ought to reflect upon Roy Branson's call for the church to rekindle its apocalyptic vision that will lead others, particularly during Sabbath worship, to encounter the risen Christ of the apocalypse:

> It is precisely that dread of the void – of meaninglessness and annihilation – that is overwhelmed by the apocalyptic vision. A truly apocalyptic Adventism draws people into experiences of worship that are encounters with the holy. Our Sabbaths are sanctuaries reverberating with the *Apocalypse's* coda to 2,000 years of religious worship – trumpet blasts, voices like the sound of many waters, shouts of the archangel, choirs of harps, amens and hallelujahs from myriad hosts. Sabbath worship is a refraction of the divine radiance; the color, movement, and vitality of the *Apocalypse's* sanctuary, filled with golden candlesticks, billows of incense, pillars of fire, thrones of precious stones. In the apocalyptic vision divine power reaches our place, our time.[52]

The hyper-eschatology impulses within Adventism – which primarily stresses the future reality of God's presence, and distort the carefully balanced eschatological framework of the New Testament, "the already/not yet" dimension of the kingdom and the new age – needs the counterweight of Roy's apocalyptic vision that stresses *the present experience and knowledge of the living God.* Indeed, if postmoderns would stop fumbling about in their search for the divine, if they would stop engaging in the sacralization of the self, and repent, they will encounter the living God who reaches our place and our time.

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[51] Roy Branson, "Trumpet Blasts and Hosannas: A Once and Future Adventism." *Spectrum Magazine* 18 (1988): 33.
[52] Ibid.