

Christ and Culture *Revisited: Towards an Adventist Theology of Culture*

Zane Yi, Ph.D.

Loma Linda University | School of Religion

“I find that the earth is to grow worse and worse ... I look on [it] as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat, and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’ ... This world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer and nearer; if you have any friends on this wreck unsaved, you had better lose no time in getting them off.”

- Dwight L. Moody¹

I. Introduction

To what extent does Moody’s sentiments reflect or should reflect Adventist attitudes toward culture? H. Richard Niebuhr, in the classic, *Christ and Culture* provides resources for grappling with this question. Culture, he explains is “the artificial, secondary environment” which is imposed on nature, including “speech, education, tradition, myth, science, art, philosophy, government, law, right, beliefs, inventions, technologies.”² Some Christians have emphasized the fundamental *opposition* between their allegiance to Christ and culture, while others have recognized a fundamental *agreement*.³ Others have sought to work out a variety of mediating positions.

Regardless of what one may think of Niebuhr’s typology of “Christ being against culture, of culture, above culture, in paradox with culture, or the transformer of culture” or his explanation and evaluation of these various positions,⁴ one thing Niebuhr convincingly

¹ Dwight L. Moody, “The Return of Our Lord,” in William G. McLoughlin (ed.), *American Evangelicals, 1800-1900* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 184-185.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, Harper & Row, 1951), 32-33.

³ These attitudes are reflected in two popular Christian hymns: “This World is Not My Home” and “This is My Father’s World.” The opening lines of the two songs contrast two different outlooks, both, arguably, found in Scripture. The first focuses on the fallen and transient nature of the present world, especially in light of the glories of the next. The other acknowledges the present world’s glory and beauty.

⁴ Niebuhr admits, “no person or group ever conforms completely to a type” (*Christ and Culture*, 44).

elucidates is how Christian attitudes toward culture are shaped by certain interpretations of Scriptural texts and emphases on particular doctrine(s). There is no easy way to reconcile some of these teachings; hence, what he calls “the enduring problem.”⁵

This paper focuses on the way Adventists think and talk about certain key doctrines and how they must be reframed if they are to motivate a more affirmative view of culture, rather than a neutral or negative one, and thus a more consistent, sustained, and constructive presence in the public sphere.⁶ My interest in theological doctrine here is the way they shape what some philosophers have referred to as “the imaginary;”⁷ that is, how we imagine reality before explicitly thinking about it, individually or collectively.⁸ My attention will be on the doctrines that shape the way we imagine the beginning, center, and end of history—creation, incarnation, and eschatology—and offering suggestions for expanding, addressing, and reframing the way we commonly think and talk about them.

II. *The Creation of the Father*

As a denomination, our current collective fixation seems to be on nailing down an understanding of *how* God may have created, rather than the affirmation *that* God created.⁹ However, earlier Christian theologians, placed emphasis on the latter; that God created and declared what was created as “good” was the focus in their interpretation of the doctrine of

⁵ Ibid., 1-44.

⁶ The kind of engagement I have in mind I term as one of “prophetic embrace” and is an alternative to what I call “the sectarian shuffle” and “the Constantinian cuddle,” the temptation to wholly withdraw from society or the tendency to live complacently and too comfortably in society.

⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 159ff.

⁸ Other similar related ideas in philosophy are “background” (Merleau-Ponty), life-world (Husserl/Heidegger), or “world picture” (Wittgenstein).

⁹ Take, for example, the recent rewording of Fundamental Belief #6 to include the words “recent six-day” to specify God’s creative activity.

creation, giving a sense of ontological value to the created order.¹⁰ Irenaeus, for example, in his engagement with the Gnostics, focuses on the goodness of creation to combat the idea that matter is evil and to be escaped.¹¹ Augustine argues, similarly, albeit in more philosophical terms, that anything that exists, i.e. has “being,” has a degree of goodness to it because existence itself, derived from God, is good.¹² A refocusing by Adventists on this earlier emphasis on the metaphysical value of the creation would contribute to a more appreciative view of culture, as a part of that order.

This is the case, because as some Christian thinkers argue, humans were created to produce culture; it is “natural” for humans to engage in art and politics. James Hunter, for example, claims that Christians are “obliged to engage the world, pursuing God’s restorative purposes over all of life, individual and corporate, public and private.”¹³ Hunter grounds his view in what he calls “the mandate of creation.” This mandate, found in the book of Genesis, has nothing to do with Sabbath observance as some Adventists may initially think (or marriage and reproduction as some Catholics might emphasize). Rather, it refers to the instructions the first humans receive to “cultivate” and “keep” the garden in which they were placed.¹⁴ According to Hunter, this applies to humans generally: “People fulfill their individual and collective destiny in

¹⁰ In opposition to the Gnostics, the early church fathers used the doctrine of creation to affirm the goodness of materiality. Creation was not to be confused with the Fall and salvation was not to be understood as an escape from the body and the physical order. What God has created is not to be disdained, but celebrated and responsibly enjoyed.

¹¹ Irenaeus argues that the various aspects of the created order must be viewed as a whole, and that as a whole, one sees a harmony that reflects the skill and wisdom of the Creator—“Those, too, who listen to the melody, ought to praise and extol the artist, to admire the tension of some notes, to attend to the softness of others, to catch the sound of others between both these extremes, and to consider the special character of others...” (*Against Heresies*, 2.25.2).

¹² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII.

¹³ James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4. Hunter and is critical of “lifeboat theology,” the view that world is a sinking ship and Christians are called to rescue as many people as possible to get off of it, so aptly articulated by Dwight Moody in the epigram above.

¹⁴ Genesis 2:15.

the art, music, literature, commerce, law, and scholarship they develop—the families, churches, associations, and communities they live in and sustain—as they reflect the good of God and his designs for flourishing.”¹⁵

Furthermore, one might argue that, according to the Genesis account, humans are created in God’s image and one of the things this involves is the capacity for creativity and care-taking. What humans create—culture and cultural artifact—are, therefore, an originally intended part of the created order. Such readings of Genesis broadens the narrow focus some in our tradition have placed on the opening chapters of Scripture, providing resources for seriously engaging culture(s) by affirming its ontological value.

This granted, the objection can be raised that despite their initial goodness, humans, and the cultural worlds they create and inhabit, are in a fallen state. Because of original sin, and its cumulative effects, human nature is “totally depraved.” Therefore, the culture produced by humans is fundamentally flawed. Appreciating this point, however, does not entail the conclusion that the *imago dei* in humans has been entirely obliterated. Total depravity, accurately understood, refers to the comprehensive scope of sin’s effects on humans, rather than its totality. While human nature is radically self-centered, humans still retain their God-given intellectual, perceptual, volitional, emotional, and moral abilities, albeit, perhaps, in a diminished form.

Properly understood, the Fall should be understood to have marred, perhaps even greatly so, rather than having destroyed the intrinsic goodness of creation and the image of God in humans. Christian theology, as Paul Tillich rightfully reminds us, affirms that humans, are

¹⁵ James Hunter, *To Change the World*, 4-5. This is an interpretation of this passage common in the Reformed tradition.

“essentially good, but existentially estranged.”¹⁶ In other words, despite their fallenness, humans still essentially bear the divine image, rather than being essentially evil and corrupt. This is a crucial distinction, as an emphasis on the goodness of creation is not a denial of its fallenness, but the reminder that the former forms the larger frame in which to acknowledge the latter. If this is true of humans, it is true of the procedures and artifacts they produce. Even in a fallen state, humans and human culture(s), in an essential way, reflect God’s goodness. This means that true prophetic critique is rooted in a deep love for individuals and communities that must be reformed, at times drastically, to better reflect the Creator’s will.

III. *The Incarnation of the Son*

As significant as the framing of the doctrine of creation is for theology and the way this impacts attitudes toward culture, the heart of theology is its vision of God and how God saves. And what makes a theology Christian (rather than Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheistic) is how one thinks God has done this (or not done this) through Jesus.

At one point of its development, the Adventist movement collectively faced a genuine choice regarding this issue—in the words of William James, this would be a choice that is “forced, living, and momentous.”¹⁷ The leaders of the fledging denomination, in their eagerness to return to the pure teachings of Scripture and reject any, in their eyes, calcifying accretions of tradition, were, in many ways, left to re-invent the theological wheel, revisiting issues wrestled with and settled earlier by those who preceded them.

¹⁶ Paul Tillich, quoted in Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 207.

¹⁷ William James, “The Will to Believe.” An Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896.

One of the earliest theological controversies of the Christian church had to do with the meaning of the word “begotten” in the Bible when it comes to Jesus’ relationship to God. Jesus is referred to as “God’s only-begotten son.”¹⁸ What does this mean? Does “begotten” mean “created”? Some argued so. This would make Jesus literally a son of God, “the father,” a creature, one who had a beginning. In the words of the Arians, who championed this view, “There was a time when he [Jesus] was not.” The other position was that a better translation for the term “begotten” is “generated,” as in the light that is generated by the sun. No metaphor is perfect, but the explanation goes, as the sun cannot be the sun without giving off light, the Father is not the Father without the Son. Therefore, the Son has always existed with the Father and is, therefore, uncreated, i.e. God.

Admittedly, this aside may seem rather arcane, and unrelated to culture and engagement with it in the public sphere. What is the relevance of this terminological hairsplitting and metaphysical speculation, especially in light of the very real problems confronting the world and the church? Another way to put the significance of this choice of how to think about God is as one prioritizing God’s transcendence from the created order or God’s intimacy with it.¹⁹ Does God, the source of all things, send someone else to do the difficult and dirty job of saving what has been wounded? Or does God get involved? And if it is the latter, how closely does God join God’s self to the world God has created?

Such questions are relevant to considerations about culture because how believers think about God and how God relates to a fallen created order, ultimately affects the way they think about their own relation to that order. In other words, there are ethical implications for what one

¹⁸ John 3:16.

¹⁹ Tara Isabella Burton, “Study Theology, Even If You Don’t Believe in God.” *The Atlantic*, on-line. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/study-theology-even-if-you-dont-believe-in-god/280999/>. Accessed 9/21/2015.

thinks about God. The church in the 4th century collectively opted for the option of translating “begotten” as “generated,” emphasizing the view that in Jesus, the Creator is getting intimately involved with what has been created rather than sending another creature. In the words of the Nicene Creed—Jesus is “the only-begotten Son of God...Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made...who for us...and our salvation, came down.” This is the vision of God that has come to define the heart of Christian orthodoxy, one shared officially by all major branches of the Christian Church—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant.²⁰

Adventism, however, almost departed from this stream of thinking about God. Many of its leaders, initially sided with Arius, seemingly unaware of the implications of doing so—or the logical contradiction of affirming this view and, at the same time, professing that “God saves.”²¹ It took the influence of a woman with a third-grade education to help them figure it out.²² “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived,” Ellen White wrote in *The Desire of Ages*, a work that would go on to shape the thinking of many Adventists on this matter.²³ Here she clearly sides with the bishops of Nicaea, and if it were not for this, Adventism today would most likely not be a recognizable Christian denomination.²⁴

²⁰ This, of course, is not to deny that other factors played significant role at Nicea. See Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

²¹ For example, J.N. Loughborough, argued that the doctrine of the Trinity was “1. Contrary to common sense. 2. Contrary to Scripture. 3. Its origin in Pagan and fabulous.” Similarly, R.F. Cottrell claimed that acceptance of the doctrine of the trinity was a sign of “intoxication from that wine which all the nations of drunk.” Both, along with the Arian views of other Adventist leaders are cited in Gerhard Pfandl, “The Doctrine of the Trinity among Seventh-day Adventists.” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 17/1 (Spring 2006): 160–179.

²² Ellen White herself was influenced significantly on this issue by the teachings of W.W. Prescott. See Gil Valentine, “Clearer Views of Jesus and the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” *Spectrum Magazine* 42/1 (Winter 2014), 66-74.

²³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), 530. Even more explicitly, she states, “He [Jesus] is equal with God, infinite and omnipotent...He is the eternal self-existing Son.” Manuscript 101, 1897, in *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1981–1993), 12:395. Cited in Pfandl. “The Doctrine of the Trinity among Seventh-day Adventists”.

²⁴ Ironically, in the eyes of some, it is her writings and their influence in the Adventist church that make it a heterodox sect.

Although Adventism, in its official declarations, has been Trinitarian in its doctrine of God, the Arian views of those who in its early years shaped the direction and discourse of Adventism, continue to persist in some sectors of the church.²⁵ Anti-Trinitarianism continues to haunt us and is another factor to be mindful of in trying to understand the suspicion some Adventists have toward culture at large and the reticence to withdraw from culture that accompanies this suspicion.

Relatedly, how one thinks about the precise nature of the incarnation can affect both the consistency and depth of one's engagement with culture. If God, through the Son, has gotten fully and permanently involved with humanity and the created order, those who profess faith in such a God should be more motivated to do the same. Alternatively, those who profess faith in a God who has gotten partially or incompletely involved have reasons to think that culture is something to be kept at arm length as they attempt to engage it.

What I am suggesting is that in addition to theology proper, Christology, too, has implications for cultural engagement. Christian orthodoxy affirms that God's union to humanity is complete and that Jesus is both "fully God and fully human."²⁶ The Creator, in other words, in Jesus, joins to humanity completely, yet preserves its integrity and the Creator's own. The

²⁵ Denis Fortin observes that "there is a resurgence of anti-Trinitarian views among Adventists. Some wish to reclaim the teachings of our Adventist pioneers on the Godhead and deny the full and eternally pre-existent deity of Jesus and the personal deity of the Holy Spirit." See Denis Fortin, "God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues." *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 17/1 (Spring 2006): 4–10. See also Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2002). Wooden observes that "not only are there increasing reports of pockets of anti-Trinitarian revival in various regions across North America, but via Internet its influence has spread around the world. As this grassroots Arian or anti-Trinitarian movement gains ground, local churches increasingly find themselves drawn into debate over the issues" (8-9).

²⁶ The Chalcedonian Creed affirms that Jesus is both "truly God and truly man" and that these two natures are to be acknowledged "unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved."

framers of this paradoxical affirmation deliberately rejected options of thinking or talking about this union as partial²⁷ or as obliterating the human.²⁸

In Adventism, debates about Christology, while seeming affirming the Chalcedonian consensus regarding Jesus, have focused on the post and pre-fallen nature of Jesus' humanity, revisiting the issue of the degree of God's union with creation in our own way.²⁹ One's conclusion on this issue, has implications for how closely one thinks God has drawn to a fallen world, and how closely one, being created in God's image, is to draw to it as well. Hence, for the sake of healthier cultural engagement, the grounding that Adventist views have in Christian orthodoxy on these matters need to be consistently emphasized.

IV. *The Renewal of the Spirit*

Aside from narrow readings of Genesis and views of God and Jesus that depart from the stream of historical Christianity, overly negative views toward culture can be further motivated by certain understandings of eschatology. As pre-millennial realists, unlike their post-millennial, more optimistic, cousins, Adventists have a degenerating view of society's general trajectory. Many evangelists and pastor constantly interpret news headlines as being indicative of a rapidly decaying society and the nearness of the second coming, which is the ultimate solution to the world's problems;³⁰ the focus of God's people today should be preparing themselves and others for it.³¹

²⁷ Apollinarianism is the view that only the rational part of Jesus' soul was divine. Nestorianism is the view that Jesus' divine and human natures are distinct parts that were conjoined together.

²⁸ Monophysitism is the view that Jesus divinity absorbs and changes his humanity.

²⁹ See J. R. Zurcher, *Touched with Our Feelings: A Historical Survey of Adventist Thought on the Nature Christ*, trans. Edward E. White (Hagerstown, MD: 1999).

³⁰ Matthew 24:37.

³¹ The recent prominence of an Adventist in the public sphere, Dr. Ben Carson, has raised questions in the public sphere about the impact his eschatological beliefs, amongst other things, may or may not have on his political

This emphasis on the nearness of Christ's return in the future can, unfortunately, lead to the functional denial of God's regenerating work in the present, which is both a clear teaching of Scripture and a significant part of Adventism's Wesleyan heritage. Wolfhart Pannenberg provides an insightful analysis of the New Testament proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, which is key part of the *kerygma*. The resurrection was a sign that the eschatological age was breaking in or as Pannenberg puts it, "If Jesus has been raised, then the end of the world has begun."³² This is not a denial of the Parousia, but the affirmation that God's work of renewal has already commenced. Hence, according to Pannenberg, the universalistic missionary activity of the early church, which is based on the vision of the Old Testament prophets had of the Messianic age, expresses this conviction.³³

Christians influenced by the Wesleyan and Catholic traditions have affirmed the work of the Holy Spirit before and after explicit faith in Christ and that salvation involves the restoration of human nature.³⁴ Unfortunately, this process of restoration, i.e. sanctification, has often been misunderstood primarily in negative terms as the avoidance of culture—abstaining from R rated movies, popular music, alcohol, tobacco, dancing, etc. But all this is a rather superficial understanding of sanctification, which ultimately has to do with God's power to restore human nature to love God and love others.³⁵ In other words, holiness is about what we do, rather than what we avoid. So, even if one believes the prospects of good culture are impossible for humans

views and leadership ability. See, for example, David Corn, "Does Ben Carson Believe Most Evangelical Voters Are Going to Hell?" <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/10/ben-carson-seventh-day-adventist-evangelical-voters-Iowa>.

³² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 1968 and Westminster John Knox Press), 67.

³³ *Ibid.* 70-72.

³⁴ Those in Arminian branch of Protestantism speak of "prevenient grace" and those in the Reformed tradition will speak of "common grace." For an effective explication of the latter view, see Richard J. Mouw. *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002).

³⁵ See John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*

in their fallen state, one should be willing to affirm that sanctified humans can produce a new kind of culture and positively impact the wider culture; they are called to be salt and light in the world.³⁶

Aside from the timing of God's renewing work, another salient issue is the nature of this work, what Adventists envision will happen at the end of history; everything will ultimately be destroyed before being recreated. But if this is the case, why should one invest in the present world at all? Miroslav Volf summarizes the tension succinctly:

The expectation of the eschatological destruction of the world is not consonant with the belief in the goodness of creation: what God will annihilate must either be so bad that it is not possible to be redeemed or so insignificant that it is not worth being redeemed. It is hard to believe in the intrinsic value and goodness of something that God will completely annihilate...Hence Christians who await the destruction of the world (and conveniently refuse to live a schizophrenic life) shy away as a rule...from social and cultural involvement.³⁷

The crux of the issue is not the timing of the *eschaton*, i.e. the *when*, but *what* we think will happen when Christ returns.

Volf identifies an important psychological issue. Humans are more prone to invest time, effort, and resources into things that will last. He, therefore, champions a view of eschatological renewal and transformation, because such a view does not counteract the motivational impetus for substantive cultural engagement. The destructive view that is shared by many Adventists (we are annihilationist in more than one sense of the word!), therefore, presents a stumbling block to such an engagement. It, however, is one based on a reading of certain texts in the Bible,

³⁶ Matthew 5:14-16.

³⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 90-91. Similarly, Richard Mouw notes that evangelical attitudes toward culture have been shaped by three interrelated strands of thought: "first, a remnant ecclesiology in which the true church is seen as a cognitive minority; second, an apocalyptic eschatology that understands the larger culture as heading toward destruction; and third, an antithetical epistemology that insists on a radical difference between Christian and non-Christian interpretations of reality." See Richard J. Mouw, "Evangelical Ethics," in Mark A. Noll & Ronald F. Thiemann (eds), *Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin? The Landscape of Evangelical Piety and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000), 78.

especially the imagery of fire found in the closing chapters of the book of Revelation.³⁸ So to address this view, one must address the interpretation of certain key passages, asking if alternate or better ones are available.

As a tradition, we acknowledge and interpret other passages in the book of Revelation in a non-literal fashion. Take, for example, Revelation 20:10, which states that “the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”³⁹ The “beast” and “false prophet” represent powers that oppose God. The eternal torment described here, it is explained, is not really eternal torment, but a punishment with eternal consequences.

Furthermore, this passage singles out determinate parties that are subject to judgment by fire. A few verses later, “death” and “Hades” are also mentioned as being cast into a “lake of fire.”⁴⁰ In sum, these passages and the closing chapters of Revelation do not depict the universal destruction of the created order. Similarly, another influential passage that has shaped the way people think about the final judgment is Malachi 4:1, which envisions the coming Day of the Lord as a day that “will burn like a furnace.” Yet, here the prophet singles out what or who that will be subject to being “burned up”—“All *the arrogant* and *every evildoer* will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire...Not a root or a branch will be left to *them*.”⁴¹

Again, the scope of God’s fiery judgment is particular, rather than universal.

³⁸ Ellen White envisions the following scene, which has undoubtedly shaped the imagination of many in the Adventist community on this matter: “Fire comes down from God out of heaven. The earth is broken up. The weapons concealed in its depths are drawn forth. Devouring flames burst from every yawning chasm. The very rocks are on fire. The day has come that shall burn as an oven. The elements melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein are burned up...The earth’s surface seems one molten mass—a vast, seething lake of fire” (*The Great Controversy*, 672-73).

³⁹ *New International Version*.

⁴⁰ Revelation 20:14.

⁴¹ *New International Version*. Emphasis mine.

The remaining key passage to consider is 2 Peter 3:10. Here, the final judgment is described in seemingly wider, catastrophic terms—“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”⁴² Yet, some legitimate questions can be raised about both the translation and interpretation of this passage. Is this description to be understood literally? Will the final judgment result in the destruction, not just of the earth, but of stars and planets, i.e. “the heavens,” too? And speaking of “the earth” and “the works that are therein,” manuscript evidence supports a significant terminological variant when it comes to the verb of the final clause. Some manuscripts, which form the basis of popular translations like the King James Version, use the verb κατακαίω, which means “to burn up.” Yet, more recent translations use the verb εὑρεθήσεται, which is a passive form of the verb εὐρίσκω, which is best translated as “to find” or “to discover.” Hence, newer translations of this passage, like the English Standard Version, render it as follows: “and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it *will be exposed*.”⁴³ The point of the passage, according to some scholars, is the comprehensive nature of the final judgment, rather than its destructive power.⁴⁴

⁴² *Authorized King James Version*.

⁴³ *English Standard Version*. The New International Version translates this passage as: “The heavens will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything on it will be laid bare.” See also the Lexham English Bible, which translates the passage as: “the heavens will disappear with a rushing noise, and the celestial bodies will be destroyed by being burned up, and the earth and the deeds done on it *will be disclosed*.” The New Living Translation renders the passage as “Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it *will be found to deserve judgment*.”

⁴⁴ For further discussion of the textual issues and debate surrounding this text, see R. J. Bauckham, *Word Bible Commentary: 2 Peter, Jude* (Vol. 50). Dallas: Word, Inc., 1998), 319. Bauckham supports the conclusions of W.E. Wilson, who claims that “The Judgment is here represented not so much as a destructive act of God, as a revelation of him from which none can escape.” See W. E. “Εὑρεθήσεται in 2 Pet. iii. 10.” *ExpTim* 32 (1920–21) 44–45.

Beyond the responsible exegesis of particular texts, ones I have shown do not indisputably support a universally catastrophic eschatology, Richard Hays reminds us that Scriptural hermeneutics also involves “the synthetic task” of wrestling with inter-canonical tensions and forming a more comprehensive view than what a particular passage says about a given topic.⁴⁵ Hays’ focus is ethical and he seems to place a priority on the New Testament’s moral concerns and themes. Yet, when it comes to eschatology, it may be fruitful, in the spirit of what Hays suggests, to read the closing chapters of Revelation, ones I am suggesting depict focused judgment, though the vision of the final age provided by the Hebrew prophets.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that in the Old Testament, “land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith.”⁴⁶ And the enduring vision of the Old Testament is an ultimate return to and restoration and regeneration of the land. The Old Testament vision of eschatology is predominantly one of renewal. In this vein, based on a close reading of Isaiah 60, where the prophet depicts the presence of pagan entities like “the ships of Tarshish” (vs. 9), foreign kings and their wealth (vs. 11), and “the cedars of Lebanon” (vs. 13), in the restored Jerusalem, Richard Mouw argues for a transformative, rather than destructive, view of the *eschaton*, where elements of culture from this age will be preserved in the next. Even things that were once used for idolatrous ends will one day be used to serve and glorify God.⁴⁷

Is it possible that God, through the Spirit is already at work, and at the end of history, rather than destroying all things, God will purify them, preserving what is beautiful, good, and true? In other words, might the imagery and symbolism of fire be better interpreted to connote

⁴⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 4-5.

⁴⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 3.

⁴⁷ Richard J. Mouw. *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 29-32.

purification through a limited destruction of evil, rather than a universal obliteration of all things, preserving a sense of ontological continuity between this world and the one to come? Such a reading would provide better motivation for consistent and constructive cultural involvement.⁴⁸

V. Conclusion

This paper has examined and questioned the nest of theological doctrines that undergird Adventist attitudes toward culture. If one thinks that creation, i.e. the material and cultural world, is evil, that the Fall totally bankrupted humankind spiritually, morally, and intellectually, that God's grace operates only within the church, that salvation involves primarily the afterlife, and that created order will totally be destroyed at the *eschaton* before being recreated, he or she will most likely have a negative view of culture. Conversely, an affirmation of the created order that recognizes its brokenness, but underscores its beauty and goodness, God's union with it through Jesus and the Spirit, and elements of it that will endure into the coming age, leads to a more affirmative view of culture. I believe that Adventists need to examine and revisit their views on these matters in order to develop a healthier, more nuanced, and balanced theology of culture, and, ultimately, a healthier, more nuanced, and balanced approach to engaging it in the public sphere. In other words, we need to revisit our assumptions about the beginning and end of the Bible—Genesis and Revelation—as well as what comes in between, salvation and the work of the Holy Spirit. Some narrow and/or traditional understandings on these topics make a

⁴⁸ In the words of Jürgen Moltmann: “The hope that is born of the cross and resurrection transforms the negative, contradictory and torturing aspects of the world into terms of ‘not yet’, and does not suffer them to end in ‘nothing.’” See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: ON the Ground and the Implications of Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 197.

consistently healthy attitude toward, and serious engagement with, culture in the public sphere impossible.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Yi Shen Ma, Ron Osborn, Leo Ranzolin, and Chuck Scriven for their feedback and comments on early versions of this paper.