

Adventist Millennials' Perceptions of Traditional Evangelistic Presentations on the Antichrist

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Summary

How do Adventist young adults relate to public evangelism and especially evangelistic presentations on the antichrist? This question forms the backbone of a survey of Adventist millennials (aged 18-34) conducted between October 26 and November 8, 2017. The results of the survey show polarization of opinions about Adventist evangelism and presentations on the antichrist between those who identify as liberal (a very negative opinion) and those who identify as conservative (a fairly positive opinion). Those who identified as moderate had more mixed reviews. In spite of the polarization there was, however, a consensus among most millennials that Adventist evangelism is not aimed at their age group and that changes in both evangelistic advertising and in presentations needs to be made.

Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist church has a long history of public presentations on Bible prophecy, reaching back to our Millerite beginnings. These presentations have often included sermons about the antichrist¹, identifying this entity as the papacy. Adventists drew some of their

¹ The term "antichrist" is a broad term used by Adventists to reference a power opposed to God but in reality based on an interpretation of three different biblical symbols: "the little horn" in Daniel 7, "the man of sin" in 2 Thessalonians 2 and "the beast" in Revelation 13.

prophetic understandings on a Reformation (and therefore American Protestant) tradition that that had historically identified the antichrist as the papacy.²

However, over time, Protestantism has generally changed its stance on the identity of the antichrist, making the prophetic interpretations of the Adventist Church on this subject a point of disconnection with wider views. A recent survey by Pew Research indicates that seven in ten Americans have a favorable view of the pope (including 53% of white evangelicals).³ Another survey by Pew Research shows that, “the majorities of both Protestants and Catholics in America say the two traditions are, religiously, ‘more similar than they are different.’”⁴

In this project, we particularly wanted to look at how Adventist millennials perceive traditional Adventist evangelistic presentations and to examine their views of the antichrist and the Reformation. We also wanted to examine what might be motivational or contextual factors for their perceptions.

Methodology

There were three phases to the survey. We began with two focus groups made up of diverse millennials to help us draft the survey. We followed this with a paper survey distributed to three general education classes at Southern Adventist University (SAU). The last phase was an electronic survey on SurveyMonkey. There were a total of over 2555 responses gathered, with 1640 responses from the millennial age group. Social media was the primary tool of recruitment

² Le Roy Edwin Froom in *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* spends considerable time tracing the Protestant tradition of identifying the papacy as the antichrist, seeing its roots in Luther’s interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel. Although Luther vacillated in his interpretation of the little horn, applying it at different times to both the pope and to the Turks, Luther applied other parts of Daniel (especially Dan. 8:25 and 11:37-41) specifically to the pope, calling him the Antichrist and the Man of Sin (Chapter Twelve, “Luther Sets Pattern for Reformation Interpretation” in *Vol. II*). Froom goes on to identify Calvin, Knox, and Cranmer as other Protestant Reformers who taught that the papacy was the antichrist. Thus, Froom argues that the Adventist interpretation is in harmony with the established Protestant view.

³ Claire Gecewicz, “U.S. Catholics, non-Catholics continue to view Pope Francis favorably” last modified on January 18, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/18/favorable-u-s-views-pope-francis>.

⁴ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Protestants Are Not Defined by Reformation-Era Controversies 500 Years later,” paper released on August 31, 2017.

for the electronic survey (1072 from Facebook and Twitter), with a number of organizations also providing a strong secondary source of respondents.⁵

Demographics of Survey Respondents

In this paper we will look primarily at the young adult response (18-34). It is important to note that the respondents in phase three were self-selected. The demographics of the respondents are therefore important to understanding their responses. Respondents were educated: 55% had already completed more than 4 years of college, while 41% were still in college or had recently graduated high school. Nursing, business, education, and theology (in that order) were the most common majors. Most respondents were from SAU (68%), although other universities were also represented.⁶ There were more females (55.5%) than male (44%) respondents⁷.

The majority of the respondents were baptized Adventists or connected with the Adventist church (95%) although 11% no longer attend regularly (less than once a month). They largely grew up in the Adventist church with 82% being born into Adventist families. 51% described their religious views as moderate and 25% described their views as conservative with just 13% describing their religious views as liberal.⁸ 65% of the respondents described their ethnicity as White/Caucasian.⁹ The majority of the respondents were from the South and West.¹⁰

⁵ Southern Adventist University Email – 444; ARISE Institute Email – 318; GYC Social Media – 297; Disciples Software Email – 177; Union College Email – 110; La Sierra University Church Young Adult Email – 34.

⁶ Andrews (15%), Union (12%), Walla Wall (6%), La Sierra, Loma Linda and Southwestern (4% each), Pacific Union (3%) and Oakwood (2%). Other colleges or universities were 1% or less.

⁷ There were 8 respondents who identified as transgender or non-conforming.

⁸ The remainder described themselves as either non-religious (5%) or came up with their own label (6%).

⁹ Other groups included Hispanic (17%), Asian/Pacific Islander (11%), Black/African-American (10%), and Other (6%). Respondents could check more than one race/ethnicity.

¹⁰ 33% of the respondents identified their home region as the South, 26% from the West, 17% from the Midwest, 11% from the Northeast and 13% International

These demographics will likely change as other entities release the survey.¹¹ As is to be expected with self-selected respondents, the demographics skew towards those interested in the topic and is biased by the methods of recruitment. This was confirmed by a comparison with the sample group selected from General Education classes, which showed the overall survey respondents to be more conservative and white than the broader Adventist population.¹²

Findings

We had several research questions going into the project and the findings of the survey will be categorized by these research questions.

1. How do Adventist Millennials perceive Adventist prophecy meetings?

In answer to the question, “What is your overall impression of Adventist evangelistic meetings on prophecy?” there were some clear differences based on their religious views. Those who identified as “Conservative” were likely to have a positive (4-somewhat positive to 5-highly positive) impression of prophecy meetings. Those who identified as “Moderate” were more neutral (weighted average of 3) and those who chose “Liberal” were likely to have a somewhat negative to strongly negative impression (average 2) of prophecy meetings.

We wanted to know what was behind the positive and negative responses and we found a strong correlation between their impression of prophecy meetings and why they originally attended them.

¹¹The survey will be ongoing with three more entities participating: the North American Division, Andrews University and Oakwood University.

¹² A selected sample from three undergraduate general education classes (all students took the paper survey) was younger (89% from those 18-24), less educated (90% without a college degree), less conservative (only 13% described themselves this way) and more ethnically diverse (Caucasians were 46% of the group) than the self-selected sample. While the age and education were expected differences, the religious viewpoint and race/ethnicity are significant differences to the group that responded to the electronic survey. This may have been because (a) the networks that were used to generate the self-selected surveys leaned toward white conservatives; and (b) white conservative Adventists are more interested in public evangelism and presentations on the antichrist (since many other racial and ethnic groups no longer use the prophecy approach to public evangelism).

Figure 1: Conservative Responses for Reasons to Attend Evangelistic Meetings

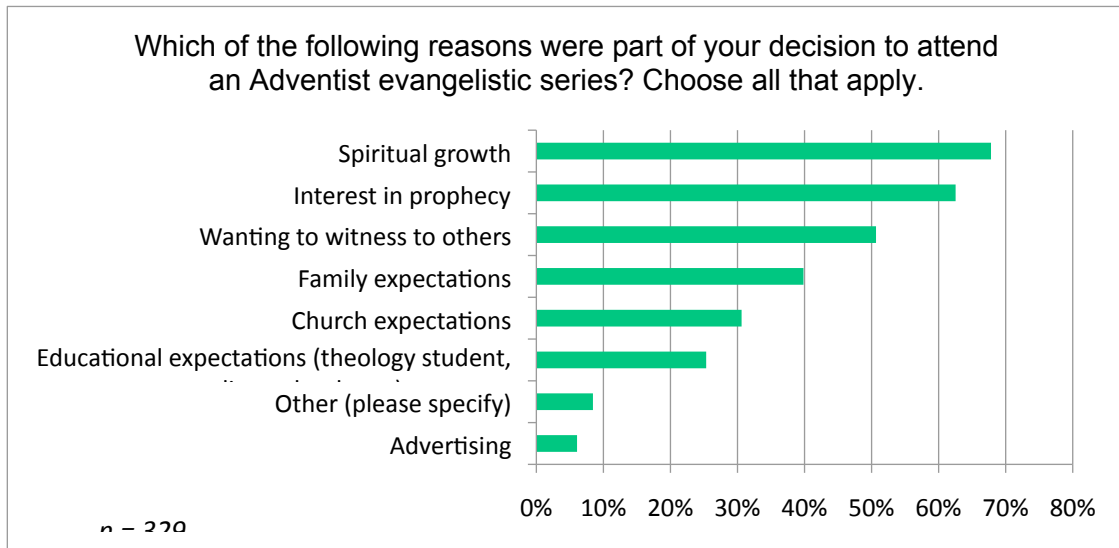
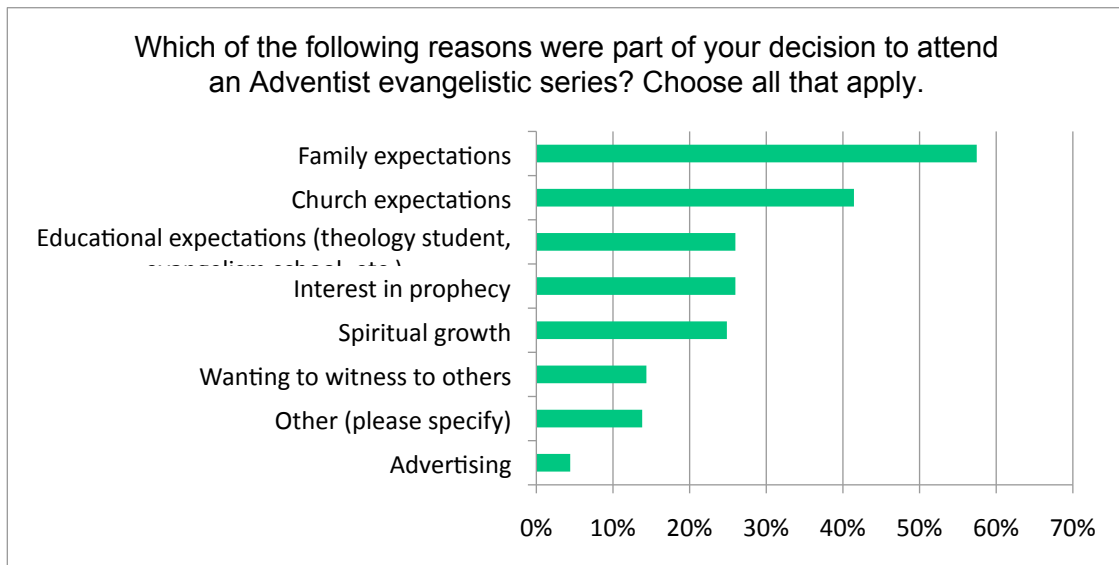


Figure 2: Liberal Responses for Reasons to Attend Evangelistic Meetings



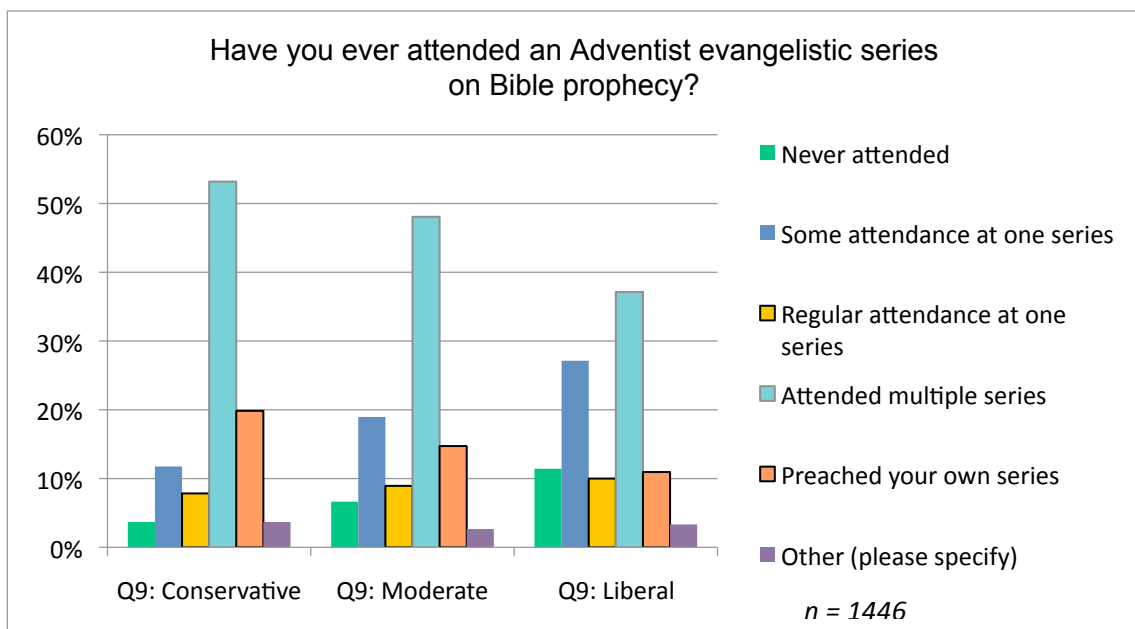
The two charts show a marked difference in the reason for attendance at a series.

Whereas a “conservative” millennial attended because of internal motivation (spiritual growth, interest in prophecy and desire to witness), a “liberal” millennial attended because of external motivation (church or family expectations). This would seem to be a significant factor in the positive or negative view of evangelistic meetings. The “moderate” millennial group fell

between these two sets of motivations. However, the number one reason for attending an evangelistic series by all millennials in the survey was “spiritual growth.” In the comments section, however, there appeared to be some frustration between the expectation of spiritual growth and the more information-based content of the meetings.

It should also be noted that there was a difference of not only attitude but level of experience between the three groups, as seen in the chart below.

Figure 3: Experience with Adventist evangelistic meetings by religious view



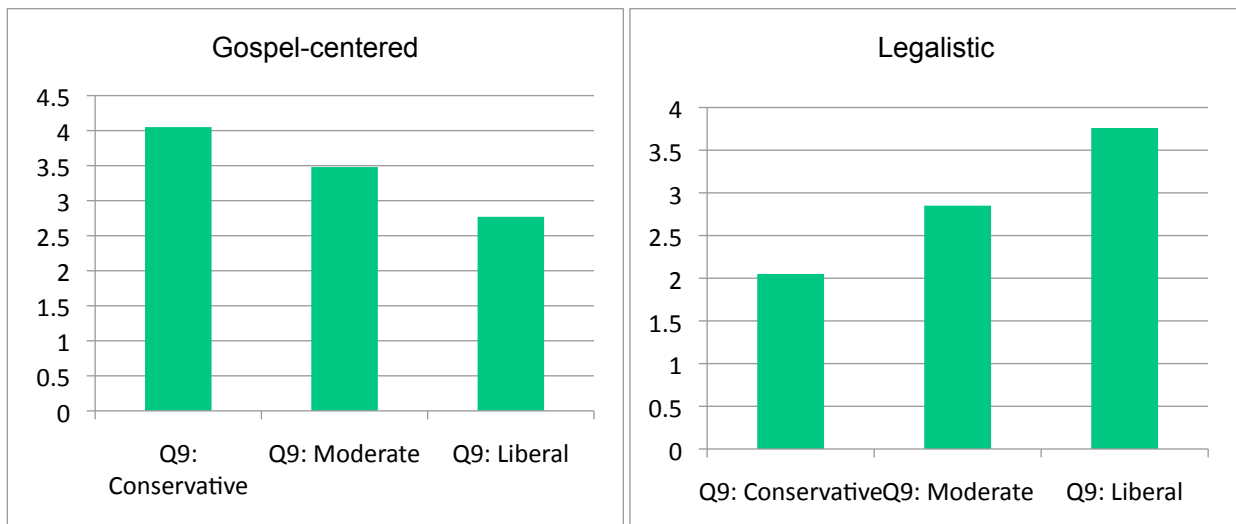
A remarkable number of millennials in the survey had attended a series (over 90%) with nearly half attending multiple prophecy-based series, and a significant number having preached their own (15%). While we do not have data on how this has changed over time, it is suspected that these numbers are much higher than in the past. This is likely due to the increased prevalence of graphics and sermon packages that have increased the number of meetings being held at local churches and opportunities to preach abroad.¹³

¹³ ShareHim, ASI, NET meetings and others have brought a resurgence of the prophecy-styled approach. Since many of the survey respondents are SAU graduates, it is likely that the Evangelistic Resource Center (ERC) is

2. How do millennials perceive the messages preached at these meetings?

We gave respondents a list of descriptors and asked them to rate the descriptors on a scale of 1 through 5 with 1 being “not at all accurate” and 5 being “very accurate.” A significant number of respondents were conflicted. For instance, a number of respondents indicated that the meetings were both gospel-centered and legalistic. In their comments, they suggested that it depended on the presentation and the speaker. They also stated that while some messages might be gospel-centered, others in the same series might be legalistic. Once again, there was a clear distinction between the liberal/moderate/conservative identifiers.

Figure 4: Millennial Perceptions of Gospel vs. Legalistic Elements in Prophecy Meetings



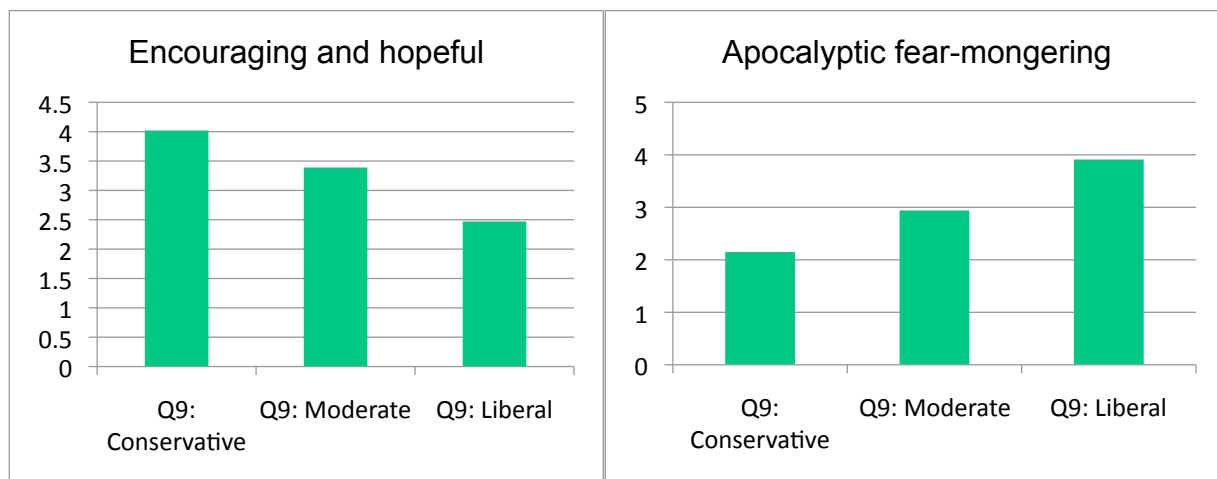
Respondents generally stated that these meetings were biblical (84% rated this statement as very accurate or mostly accurate), but once again, there was a conflicted response, with a number of respondents also seeing it as speculative (48% rating this description as somewhat to very accurate). In their comments on the question, these respondents felt that there was a lack of context provided to biblical passage and a tendency to proof-text in the presentations. Some felt

also responsible for these high figures. The ERC sends about 100 students (from all disciplines) to preach an evangelistic series overseas each year. SAU also requires all theology students to preach their own series.

that while the meetings were biblical, speculative elements would be brought in. One respondent noted, “I love use of the Bible to explain the Bible, especially when the topic is presented with clarity and relevance. I dislike the use of non-credible media sources like conspiracy theory blogs/websites or opinion columns.”

The greatest division seemed to be around the perceived atmosphere of the meetings. As the figure below shows, the conservative group tend to see the meetings as hopeful, whereas the liberal group tended to see it as fear-based.

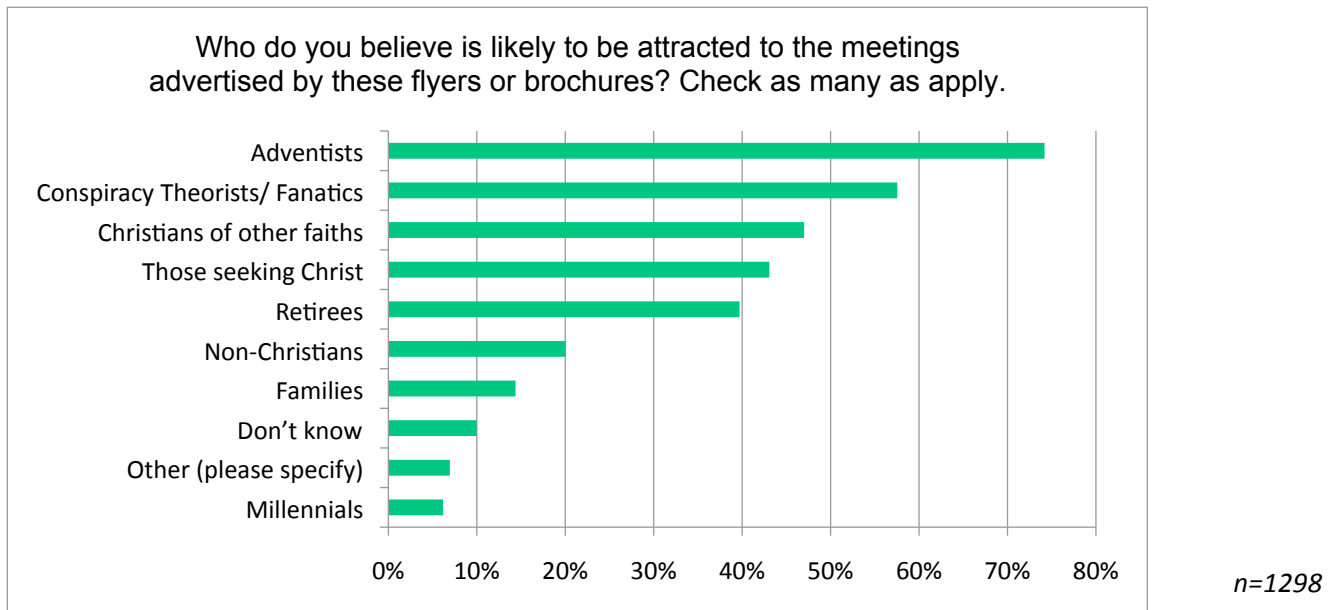
Figure 5: Impression of Hope and Fear in Evangelistic Meetings



In spite of the obvious polarization in most questions, there was one area where many millennials were in agreement. This was in the advertising that was done for prophecy meetings. Many respondents from all backgrounds were critical of the advertising. The following comment was typical, “I find the advertising used to be a bit sensational and out of touch. I personally feel the imagery (all the beasts, etc) and such is outdated and off-putting to many in my generation.” Those from a graphic design background were particularly annoyed by the outdated look and wondered why we were using the same artwork from decades ago. “Flyers and brochures are so old school that they fail to have much relevance outside of an already existing group who is already interested, or someone who happens to be seeking that specific information.”

Overall, there was a compelling sense that our advertising was aimed at Adventists and conspiracy-theorists and fanatics. As one respondent stated, “This is for people who find sensational images appealing.” They clearly did not see millennials as the intended audience.

Figure 6: Impression of Audience Attracted by Advertising



When asked how likely they were to invite a friend to a meeting, the response was mostly negative, except for the conservative group. There was a common criticism that we had nothing new to offer. “Most series are all the same, just reiterating the same dates, points and verses; the only difference is the packaging.” There was some frustration that we seem to focus more on doctrines than on Christ and that the content was either irrelevant or even offensive to others. “How could I bring my Catholic friend to these meetings, when he is going to hear that we think his church is the antichrist?” However, those who had the most positive impressions of the meetings were also the most likely to invite a friend.

When asked to respond to the open-ended question, “What would make you want/likely to attend an Adventist evangelistic series?” there were several areas of consensus that emerged.

Strong themes were (a) make sure we share the gospel and speak about Jesus; (b) make it relevant and practical to our lives; (c) use fresh material; (d) keep it biblical and not speculative; (e) make the meetings shorter; (f) food; (g) use engaging speakers – someone who speaks our language and isn't boring; (h) show how to grow my relationship with Jesus; (i) place an emphasis on Redemption rather than Revelation; (j) make them more interactive – perhaps using small tables; (k) include more social issues; (l) do something that is not in a church – maybe online; (m) advertise in a way that reaches the inbox (or the phone) rather than the mailbox; (n) use better visuals; and (o) involve millennials in the planning and presenting. For those from the liberal perspective, the answer generally echoed this respondent, “I'd rather stab myself in the eye.” However, a number said that if it was relevant, biblical, focused on Jesus and was beneficial to people of all faiths, that they could see themselves attending one.

3. How do Adventist Millennials Relate to Presentations on the Antichrist?

This issue was deeply polarizing. Millennials were asked to respond to the following, “The Adventist pioneers taught that the antichrist power could be historically identified as the papacy. How do you feel about this view?” 86% of the conservative group felt that it was still biblical and relevant compared to 65% of the moderate group and just 22% of the liberal group. However, millennials (even from the liberal group) were reluctant to say that this view was fundamentally incorrect (only 2% of all millennials felt this way), choosing rather to say that they didn't know much about the view (14%) or that it was relevant for the 19th century but is now outdated (7%).

A number of millennials in the focus group had raised a question about whether or not people under the age of 50 were still interested in the antichrist, so we asked the question, “What is your level of interest in finding out the identity and activities of the Antichrist?” Only 12% of

millennials said they were extremely interested in this topic. An additional 25% indicated that they were very interested. This means that six out of ten millennials in this study had only a minimal to mild interest. The liberal group was the most vocal in this area with more than half of them indicating that they had no interest in this topic. A common refrain among all millennials was stated by this respondent, “We should know our enemy, but more so we should know our Saviour.”

We asked respondents to answer the following open-ended question, “What message about the Antichrist should Adventists be sharing?” Over 1,000 millennials responded, many of them with extensive comments.

Four strong themes emerged from the conservative group: (a) warn people of the coming danger so that they are not fooled; (b) make sure we point out that this is not about people but a system; (c) show that the papacy is sharing a false gospel and non-biblical teachings; and (d) show that it is more than just a system, and that we should be concerned with the spirit of the antichrist rather than just the papacy. This last view appeared to be a newer conservative view that was gaining traction. Most in this group felt that we should definitely share on this topic and that we should not water it down.

The moderate group generally agreed that the papacy as a system represented the antichrist, but they wanted to see that definition broadened and were concerned with *how* the message was presented. Themes that emerged from this group were (a) whatever we do, let’s make sure we reveal Jesus first; (b) it’s a matter of timing and we should wait until we’ve won the trust of the individual; (c) the antichrist is more than a system – it is any false gospel; (d) make it a message of hope and love, rather than focusing on the papacy. A significant number were unsure or felt that they didn’t have enough information to make a suggestion in this area.

The liberal group were more likely to indicate that Adventists had missed the mark on this topic and that we should never be presenting it publically. “Can we just not?” was a common response. Themes that emerged were (a) let’s focus on God’s character and on love; (b) the antichrist within is more worrisome than the external system; (c) stop labelling and excluding others by creating an us-them mentality; and (d) stop creating fear in people and point them to a relationship with God/Christ instead.

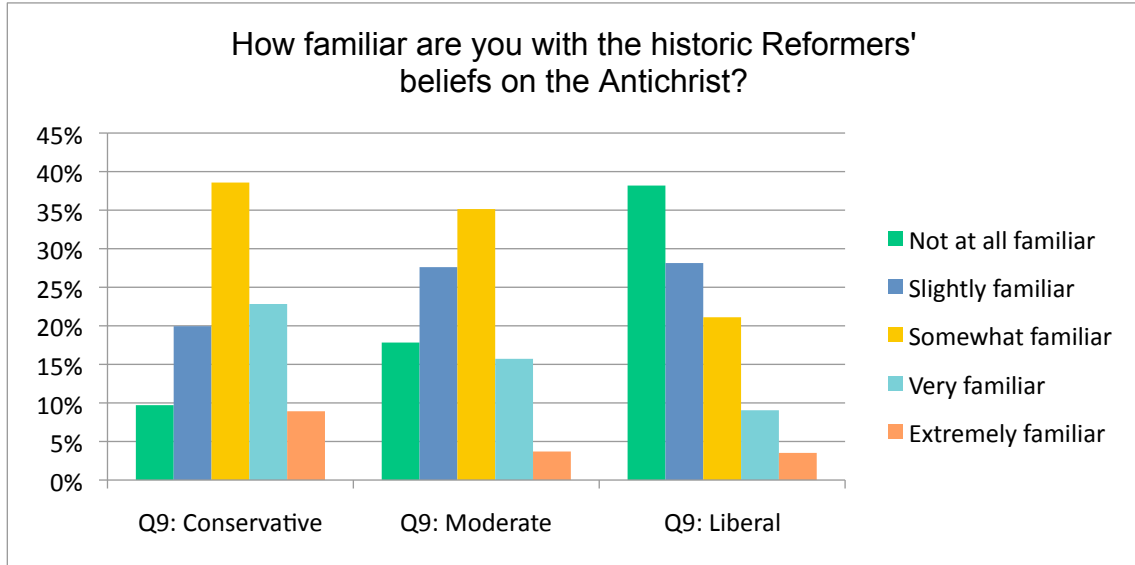
Thus, the response to this question was not monolithic but was dependent on the person’s perspective as to whether the antichrist was more internal (the spirit of the antichrist) or external (the papacy). The conservative group were more concerned that we didn’t lose our responsibility to declare this truth to others, the moderate group was most concerned about our method of sharing these ideas and the liberal group was hoping we could avoid talking about it at all and focus instead on the gospel.

4. How do Views of the Antichrist Relate to Understandings of the Reformation?

We asked the following question, “How familiar are you with the historic Reformers’ beliefs on the Antichrist?” There was a direct correlation between perceived familiarity with the Reformers’ teaching on the antichrist and a positivity towards Adventist evangelistic presentations. However, we also found a correlation between perceived familiarity and being conservative. To help counteract this bias, we asked them to rate the accuracy of five statements, to determine the extent of their knowledge of Reformation views.¹⁴ One of the statements said that Martin Luther was favorable to both the Jews and the Sabbath. Conservatives were more likely to disagree with this statement than were other groups.

¹⁴ These five statements were, “Martin Luther said the papacy and its institutions was Babylon,” “Martin Luther fought against abuses in the Catholic Church but was not trying to start a new church,” “Martin Luther was favorable toward both Jews and the seventh-day Sabbath,” “The Reformers taught that the antichrist was the papacy,” and “The Roman Catholic Church persecuted and killed many Bible believing Christians over more than a thousand years.”

Figure 7: Familiarity with Reformer Views Compared with Religious Views



Most millennials (more than 90%) indicated that they had not personally read Reformation writings and were dependent for their understanding of these views on secondary sources.

There was once again a sharp divide of opinion on whether or not Protestants and Catholics should work together in areas where they can agree. 80% of the liberal group agreed with this statement (weighted average 4), compared to 44% of the moderates (average 3) and just 22% (average 2) of the conservatives.

Conclusions

Seventh-day Adventist young adults/millennials (aged 18-34) appear to have polarizing views of Adventist evangelism and especially of presentations on the antichrist. Those with more conservative religious views are likely to see such presentations as a necessary part of the Adventist mandate to warn the world of the coming apostasy and false worship. They are more likely to be interested in traditional Reformation views of the antichrist. Those who identify as “moderate” appeared to be less aware of Reformation and historic Adventist views and more

concerned about how we might be sharing the message in a way that alienates others. They tended to see the antichrist as more than just a system and as a spirit of deception or false worship. Those who identified as liberal were the least interested in the identity and activities of the antichrist and also strongly negative toward Adventist public evangelism. They were not inclined to see the antichrist as a system, but rather as a way of life lived against God.

While this strong polarization existed, areas of consensus did occur. Almost all respondents agreed that current Adventist public evangelism is not aimed at millennials. Prophecy presentations were generally seen as being marketed to Adventists and conspiracy-theorists and fanatics. And there were several helpful suggestions for how Adventist public evangelism could appeal to a millennial audience. Many millennials wanted fresh presentations, better visuals and more practical messages rather than a rehashing of old material that was largely information-based.

It is important to remember that more than half of the millennial group rejected the polarization perspectives of liberal or conservative. Whatever their perspective, we should focus on listening to each other's voices rather than rejecting them. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:

“The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 97-8.