

## Towards a more Radically ‘Adventist’ Adventism

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John Webster  
La Sierra University

“When philosophy paints its gray on gray, then has a form of life grown old, and with gray on gray it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known; the Owl of Minerva first takes flight with twilight closing in.” G. W. F. Hegel, “Preface,” *Philosophy of Right*<sup>1</sup>

The world as we have known it has grown old. The modern world with its self-evident foundations, limitless growth, and trickle down theories, has collapsed around us. In fact, twilight has been upon us for some time. If Hegel is right, then now is the time for true self-awareness, for examining our “form of life grown old.” Clearly, an Advent Movement, born in the apocalyptic fervor of the 1840's, has some serious reflecting to do, if it is to avoid ossification and renew itself as a dynamic movement with something meaningful to say to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This will be no easy task. Nevertheless, it is the project we have undertaken for this year’s meeting of the Adventist Society of Religious Studies. For we have called for nothing less than a “Re-envisioning of Adventism.” In the first place, this means that we must take another look at Adventism, as it currently is.

But ‘twilight’ can also denote dawn as well as dusk.<sup>2</sup> Could it be that we are as much at the dawn of a new world, as at the end of an old? For just as every dusk finally gives way to dawn, so out of this darkness will surely come a new day.<sup>3</sup> Could we even be at both together—as though we were in some far northern land of the midnight sun where dusk bleeds directly into dawn? Are we perhaps in that morning twilight, where forms begin to take shape, though still only in outline? What will this new day look like, and how should the church respond? This too is an issue we will explore in this year’s conference. For to “Re-envision Adventism” is not to give up on Adventism, nor merely to revise it, or repackage it—it means to once again *envision* what it might mean to be an Advent Movement amidst the movements of our time. Thus, in the second place, this means that we must take another look at Adventism, not only as it is, but also as it might become.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The owl of Minerva is a symbol of wisdom drawn from Roman mythology. Hegel’s famous quote alludes to his conviction that we can only understand a historical condition just as it is passing away. Philosophy cannot be prescriptive because it understands only in hindsight. Here is the quote in fuller context and contemporary translation: “One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. . . . When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy’s gray in gray it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.” G.W.F. Hegel, “Preface,” *Philosophy of Right* (1820).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Richard Wagner who, in his opera *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods), draws on the fact that *dämmerung* (twilight) can refer to the time before dawn as well as the time after dusk, for the term alludes to both the rising and setting of the sun.

<sup>3</sup>I am reminded of how that old Adventist hymn, drawing on Romans 13:12, puts it: “arise yourself, for the night is far gone, and the day is at hand.”

<sup>4</sup>Change is in the air. Whether we like it or not, it is likely that the church will change along with the world around us. What will this change look like? I was writing these words as election results were pouring in two weeks and two day ago. The air was thick with talk of epochal change. History was in the making. For me personally, it

## I. Adventism in a New Key

“In every religious movement there come times when the call of God to advance is sounded—a summons to quicken the pace, to take higher ground, to break with the *status quo*, to enter into a new relationship and experience with Him. . . We have clearly come to such a time in the Advent Movement. . . The old attitudes and easy momentum of yesteryear are no longer possible. The present is surely developing into such an hour of decision, a time of renewal and advance.”<sup>5</sup> These words, penned by one of the most prolific and influential (though self-made) ‘administrator-scholars’ in the Adventist church of his time—LeRoy Edwin Froom—seem uncannily pertinent to the situation today, even though they were written more than three decades ago, toward the end of his life. With these words Froom began his last major book—*Movement of Destiny*—a work which, he tells us, while commissioned by A. G. Daniels in 1930 took him almost his whole life to eventually complete. In the end it appeared as a sort of “swan song”—a veritable manifesto for the kind of Adventism Froom believed had finally “come of age.” What the old protagonist probably had not foreseen was the backlash and counter-movements of the 1980's and 90's which have muted his clarion call for an evangelical-ecumenical Adventism which saw the “three-angels message” as both grounded-in and an extension-of the “Eternal Verities” of historic Christianity.

As things have transpired Adventism has apparently not yet “broken with the *status quo*” nor yet “finally come of age”. In the subsequent decades since Froom issued his call the waters have, if anything, become more, rather than less, murky. If at the end of the Froom era we had Geoffrey Paxton (a sympathetic outsider) write *The Shaking of Adventism*,<sup>6</sup> more recently we have had the former editor of the *Review* publishing a book entitled *The Fragmenting of Adventism*.<sup>7</sup> Church members themselves are reading the very different renderings of Adventism as

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was hard to hold back the tears. I found myself consciously and emotionally recalling standing in line waiting to vote in 1994 in South Africa’s first fully democratic election following the release of Nelson Mandela. The “Auda-city of Hope” indeed. All this is significant for the church. As Karl Barth said long ago, “the preacher must have the Bible in the one hand and the Newspaper in the other.” In the days since the election the full scope of what happened has become clearer. Obama has succeeded, not just in winning an election, but in launching a movement. He has obviously tapped into the enthusiasm and idealism of the next generation. Did the election represent a cultural shift from right to left in the country? Probably. And if history is any guide this portends a similar shift in the church in due course (although there is always a temporal lag, it would seem). But what is really important, is something else. Something I had noted and commented on from the beginning. It seems that Obama recognized a deep hunger in this country, a hunger to move on past polarizing partisanship toward a search for what we hold in common. I believe, that this is the really important lesson to be taken from this election. Could it be, that we are seeing an increasingly powerful longing for much the same in the church? To move past the ideological stances that have led to tensions in our community—towards more centrist positions. I believe that this is the case, and the proposal I will be articulating and defending in this paper should be seen against the background of just such a hope.

<sup>5</sup>LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1971, 1978), p. 25-26.

<sup>6</sup>Geoffrey Paxton, *The Shaking of Adventism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978).

<sup>7</sup>William G. Johnsson, *The Fragmenting of Adventism: Ten Issues Threatening the Church Today; Why the Next Five Years are Crucial* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub., 1995).

portrayed in *Adventists Affirm* and *Adventist Today*<sup>8</sup>—just to mention two journals still within the orbit of institutional Adventism. The issue is not, of course, theological controversy or even pluralism as such—for both have been part of Adventism from the very beginning. *It is creeping paralysis induced by theological-ethical-existential polarization*. An ideological paralysis caused by our pulling in fundamentally opposite directions (like the winged horses in the analogy of the soul in Plato’s *Phaedrus*). For it is one thing to be arguing over doctrines such as the trinity, the nature of Christ, or details of last-day events, but quite another to be unsure of our very identity as a community, or our direction as a movement.<sup>9</sup> It certainly will not help to ask for the “real Adventist” to please stand up,<sup>10</sup> for it is precisely the problem that a number of very different voices purport to speak for Adventism today.<sup>11</sup> The “Movement of Destiny” seems to be at risk of stalling in the very territories that gave it birth, not because it has run out of steam, but because it is unsure of which “destiny” to pursue.

Nevertheless, I believe it is time that Froom’s *challenge to advance* be taken up seriously once again. The ideological paralysis must be overcome.<sup>12</sup> What we need is nothing less than a *renewal of Advent vision*. Central to such a task, I believe, must be a new account of both the destiny and the route of the Advent Movement. A movement’s destiny (goal or object) should be conveyed by a clear and compelling ‘central narrative’. We will focus on this below. But a movement’s route (way or *modus operandi*) is best captured by its *tone*. (We will have less to say about this aspect of re-envisioning in this paper.) A somewhat oblique reference to a particular metaphor—a metaphor drawn from the world of music theory—will have to suffice for now. With respect to tone, what I think we need here in North America is an “*Adventism in a New Key*.”<sup>13</sup> We don’t need to change our tune, or stop singing, but may I suggest, we desperately

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<sup>8</sup>See *Adventists Affirm: A Publication Affirming Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (P.O. Box 36, Berrien Springs, MI); and *Adventist Today* (Riverside CA), a bimonthly journal dedicated to “fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community.”

<sup>9</sup>Attention to this paralysis has come from voices as diverse as the former GC President: “I sense a growing uncertainty about why we exist as a church and what our mission is,” Robert S. Folkenberg, “When Culture Doesn’t Count,” *Ministry* (December, 1995), p. 7; and Jack Provonsha (Loma Linda ethicist and theologian, now deceased), who spoke of a “crisis of identity” facing “the First World Seventh-day Adventist Church” Jack Provonsha, *A Remnant in Crisis* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>As Clifford Goldstein asks on the current home page of the *Adventist Today* website: “Will the Real ‘Thinking’ Adventist Please Stand Up? Part I”

<sup>11</sup>Note the four articles in *Adventism Today* that speak of a “historic,” “mainstream,” “evangelical” and “progressive” Adventism, Jan/Feb 1994 edition.

<sup>12</sup>Of course, the way Froom himself (together with contemporaries such as F. D. Nichol) dealt with similar issues of uncertainty in their own day—by forming a sort of unofficial General Conference *magisterium*, and then making *ex cathedra* pronouncements, e.g. as happened with *Questions on Doctrine*—is, and with good reason, no longer open to us today.

<sup>13</sup>I am indebted to Robert MacAfee Brown for this metaphor. See: Robert MacAfee Brown, “Established Harmonies: A Diminished Seventh in Need of Resolution (The Possibility of a New Direction),” Chapter 1, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

need a change of key. To all-too-many ‘first world’ ears Adventism has become shrill at best and downright painful to listen to at worst. To use biblical language—we have become like a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). We seem to be majoring in minors. We’ve wandered off-key—here too sharp, there too flat. To stick with our musical metaphors and double entendre, we could say that contemporary Adventism is in the key of the *diminished 7<sup>th</sup>*. But precisely here lies our hope for the future! For you see the diminished 7<sup>th</sup> is a *transitional* chord, that is often used in modulating from one key to the next. It begins a move away from the dominant key, and opens up the possibility of transition to several different—but all related—new keys. While I will not be talking directly about tone in what follows, perhaps we can keep this metaphor in mind as we proceed.

In this paper I wish to engage you in conversation about the central narrative of Adventism. First, do we have one? If so what is it? Has it changed over time? Has it become fuzzy? Should it change? How could it change? Secondly, I would like to make a specific proposal in this regard: that Adventist theology should become more radically “Adventist”. By “Adventist” I mean focused on the Advent, that is the Coming of God (the One who has come, comes and will come again). This will require considerable articulation, explication and differentiation. Essentially, the change I am recommending would effect something akin to a ‘gestalt switch’ (gestalt psychology), ‘paradigm shift’ (Kuhn), or the “dawning of an aspect” (Wittgenstein). In short, it will entail a ‘re-envisioning of Adventism’. Finally, I would like to briefly sketch a few implications for the theology and practice of the Advent Movement, so re-envisioned.

## II. Adventism’s Central Narrative

If this recent presidential election has taught us anything, it is the importance to the success of any campaign of a *consistent, clear and compelling central narrative*. It would seem to me that much the same applies to successful execution of the mission of the church. So we can ask ourselves: Do we have a *consistent, clear and compelling central narrative* today? Let’s briefly explore this issue.

I think a good case could be made that the Millerite movement of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century *did* have a clear central narrative. It was “Jesus is coming again, soon.” After the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, the fragment of that group that would later become Seventh-day Adventists, rallied around a central narrative that went something like this: “Jesus *is* coming soon, but first judgment in heaven and reform on earth.”<sup>14</sup> As the ‘delay’ in the second advent grew longer, alternative narratives began to arise and compete for the voice of the community. Spinning off from Sabbath reform, came the authority/obedience narrative: “God is waiting for full obedience to all his laws, before returning” (which for many, quickly reduced to “Keep the law, including the seventh-day Sabbath, if you wish to be saved when He returns”). By 1888 this

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<sup>14</sup>This leaves out the subtle shifts between the “shut door” and “open door” stages during the first decade after the disappointment.

had led to a counter narrative: “Readiness for the advent—righteousness—comes only by faith in Christ (and through the indwelling Spirit).” With the turn of the century, the death of Ellen White, and the rise of fundamentalism in the 1920's, the picture blurred considerably. We had “holy flesh”, “pantheist” and “perfectionist” accounts of Adventism arise, only to be sidelined. While other new narratives emerged and endured: e.g. “We have the truth (thanks to the Spirit of Prophecy);” “We are the ‘People of the Book’;” and “We are the Remnant.” As missionary work expanded (1920 to 1960) perhaps the dominant narrative became: “When the gospel has been proclaimed to the whole world, then Jesus will return.” By the time *Questions on Doctrine* had been published (1957), its nameless authors (widely reported to be Froom, Reed and Anderson) were hopeful that the central narrative would run something like this: “Proclaiming the three angels message in the context of the eternal verities of Christianity.” However, as we now know, it was not to be.

Today, four significantly different accounts of Adventism vie for the church’s heart: “When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in his people, then He will come to claim them as His own”—so called ‘Historic Adventism’<sup>15</sup>; “Justification by faith is the third angel’s message in verity”—so called ‘Evangelical Adventism’<sup>16</sup>; “There is . . . present truth for the church today. We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn”—so called ‘Progressive Adventism’<sup>17</sup>; and finally, “Proclaiming the Advent Message, to make ready a people prepared for our Lord’s return”—what we might call, ‘Institutional,’ ‘Missionary’ or ‘Evangelistic’ Adventism.<sup>18</sup> One might note, not without a certain irony, that each of these narratives can be stated (as we have done above) by quoting from the same authoritative, founding voice in Adventism! Of course, some might respond by denying any incompatibility at all (which, admittedly, is formally correct), and then attempt to argue ‘the more the merrier’ (which, most of us would admit, is functionally unsound).<sup>19</sup> Whether we like it or not, lack of narrative clarity is a feature of contemporary Adventism. Each of these four quotes could be, and has been, spun out into comprehensive (and contradictory) narratives of who we are, why we are here, and where we are heading. The tensions cannot be wished away.

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<sup>15</sup>E. G. White, *Christ’s Objects Lessons*, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup>E. G. White, *Review & Herald*, April 1, 1890.

<sup>17</sup>From here: “There was a present truth in the days of Luther—a truth at that time of special importance; there is a present truth for the church today. He . . . has been pleased to place men under various circumstances and to en-join upon them duties peculiar to the times in which they live and the conditions under which they are placed. If they would prize the light given them, broader views of truth would be opened before them.” E. G. White *Great Controversy*, p. 143. And here: “There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. . . We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, will be disappointed. . .” E. G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 35-39).

<sup>18</sup>E. G. White Trustees, “Preface,” *Evangelism*, p. 5. Cf. “Evangelism, the very heart of Christianity, is the theme of primary importance to those called to herald God’s last warning to a doomed world.” *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup>But this is where the political allusion is helpful. While each of the many permutations of McCain’s campaign message might have been ‘true’, the net effect of the multiple narratives was lack of focus and uncertainty.

Furthermore, the problems we are addressing are not merely superficial. It's not as if all we need is a good marketing or media consultant; a new 'brand'; or merely a new slogan or rallying cry. The point is that there are real issues at stake here, and they run deep. What we need is not a cosmetic solution,<sup>20</sup> but rather a comprehensive re-framing of the problem itself.

First, it is noteworthy (and understandable) that practically all of these alternative narratives presume, assume or articulate a particular 'way of relating' to the 'advent'—an "interpretive stance", if you please. Whether overtly or covertly, the underlying issue to be addressed is this—how are we going to explain, to ourselves as much as to anyone else, the 'delay' in the second coming? In what sense can we continue to be Adventists some 164 years after the Great Disappointment?<sup>21</sup> This is the elephant in the room. The 'historic adventists' give an explanation for the delay; the 'evangelical adventists' suggest a motive for the delay; the 'progressive adventists' ignore or deny the delay; while the 'institutional adventists' give a criterion for ending the delay. Wherever we come out, our theological stance explicitly or implicitly projects a basic orientation to the "advent". There is nothing odd about this. After all we are "Adventists."<sup>22</sup> *What is significant, however, is how little we have reflected on the actual meaning of the 'Advent' itself.*

In what follows, I wish to pick up on precisely this question. What is the Advent? And what role should it play in our theology? In doing so, I will be turning from these general remarks, more specifically to the kind of discourse typical of the discipline of systematic theology.<sup>23</sup> I make no apology for this, for it is always a good thing when a speaker does not stray too far from his or her own field of expertise.<sup>24</sup> However, I will try to avoid technical jargon and in-house debates, as far as possible.

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<sup>20</sup> I am tempted to say "put lipstick on a pig", but that would be pushing it with an Adventist audience on multiple accounts!

<sup>21</sup> Of course, we don't lack for answers: the 'harvest principle' (God is waiting for a final generation to be 'exhibit A' in the judgment) from the 'historic adventists'; the 'grace principle' (God is waiting for us to truly understand the gospel) from the 'evangelical adventists'; the 'this-worldly principle' (not 'pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by,' but here and now, in this world) of the 'progressive adventists'; and the 'growth principle' (When the gospel has been proclaimed in the whole world, then He will come) from the 'institutional adventists'.

<sup>22</sup> It's the noun in our name (the 'seventh-day' being the adjective which describes the branch of Adventist we belong to). We even need to remember that we were Adventists before we were Sabbath-keepers. In fact, James and Ellen White, to say nothing of others, were Sunday keeping Adventists for several years after the Great Disappointment. So, all this is quite to be expected.

<sup>23</sup> Which is what? Conventionally, systematic theology is often thought of as either: a) an exercise in 'systematizing' Biblical teachings around a particular theme, or producing a philosophically coherent system of Christian thought; b) an exercise in apologetics, explaining and defending Christian beliefs within a particular cultural context; or c) an exercise in problem solving ('faith seeking understanding,' Anselm). While there is something to be said for each of these conceptions (and others besides), this is not what I understand to be the task of systematic theology. Rather, I take it to be a *rigorous inquiry into the critical systemic decisions that have always already been implicitly decided in the theory and praxis of any living faith community, with a view to bringing them to light, and evaluating them for correspondence, coherence and consistency—calling for revision where necessary—and ultimately, testing the community's 'whole web of belief' for its adequacy in terms of its own Object.* This is a narrower view of its task.

<sup>24</sup> Given the split between the AAR and SBL this year, the irony is not lost on me that I am the odd one out!

### III. Adventism and the Advent

I propose that the way forward is for Adventist theology to become more ‘radically Adventist’ rather than less so. What I mean by this is that we will come to realize that the ‘Advent’ is not merely one among several themes *of* our theology, but rather that it is, itself, its very *object or subject-matter*;<sup>25</sup> the substantive reality which theology seeks to elucidate in every one of its themes. This is possible because the ‘Advent’ is nothing other than the very Coming of God itself—i.e. ‘God with us’. In what follows I will attempt to explain this proposal, distinguish it from potential misunderstandings, defend it from likely objections, and finally elucidate some of the implications that would follow from this shift of focus for our faith and practice.

It should be clear by now that by ‘Adventist’ in “more radically Adventist” I am referring to ‘having to do with the Advent’—‘advent relatedness,’ if you please—rather than merely as a denominational label.<sup>26</sup> ‘Adventism’ is therefore to be taken here as a descriptor of a type or school of theology—one which is fundamentally oriented towards the Advent.

Of course, the central question is what do we mean by ‘the Advent’?<sup>27</sup> It is quite revealing that if you asked most Adventists, they would almost instinctively reply—the second coming of Christ; while if you asked most Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists or Lutherans, they would reply—Christmas! Obviously, any talk of a ‘second advent’ of necessity implies a ‘first advent.’ Moreover, upon further reflection, we would most likely agree that even the first advent was not the first ‘coming’ or ‘appearance/presence’ of God recounted in Scripture. For, while the term *parousia* is not found in the canonical Septuagint, the idea of the coming, appearing or presence of God certainly is. In short, therefore, in referencing the ‘Advent’, I intend to refer to the broad concept of the Coming of God. In the context of the Bible and theology, the Advent or Coming of God, is a purported event (or “happening”), or better yet, a “complex tri-axial series of events”. But more of that later. First, I would indulge your patience while I attempt a little more specificity on the meaning of the notion of the “Coming of God” itself, for the purpose of greater elucidation, and to head off a potential critique.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>“*Die Sache*”, as the Germans would put it.

<sup>26</sup>The denominational label, Seventh-day Adventist, is thus not only a reference to a particular world-wide religious community, it also describes the kind of theology it espouses. Other similar examples would be: the Dutch Reformed Church, the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, or the Greek Orthodox Church.

<sup>27</sup>Our English word obviously comes from the Latin term *adventus* (“coming”), which in turn was used to translate the original NT Greek word *parousia* (παρουσία) meaning “appearance and subsequent presence with.” In the NT *parousia* is used either in its common sense of coming, or (with the article) for the return of Christ. In the ancient world *parousia* often referred to official visits by royalty or other dignitaries.

<sup>28</sup>The potential critique is this: If you make the ‘Advent’ the substance or object which theology seeks to inquire after and understand (rather than merely one of its themes), are you not presuming the very thing which theology must first establish—that there is in fact a God? Would this not be an exercise in circular reasoning? Furthermore, are you not making faith rather vulnerable to the vicissitudes of historical analysis? Is there really an advent?

## *Meaning of the 'Coming of God'*

While it may be second nature for an Adventist to talk of the coming of God, this might not be such an obvious concept for everyone, including perhaps even some of us here today.<sup>29</sup> Given that I am advancing the claim that the 'Advent' or 'Coming of God' should be understood as the very Object of theology, all this becomes even more acute.<sup>30</sup> In what follows, I wish to briefly sketch six increasingly freighted senses in which we can talk of the 'coming of God'. They move from a minimalist to a maximalist account; from a rendering that even the most cynical of non-believers could no-doubt accept, to a fully fleshed out theological account. The essence of my proposal is that the 'Coming of God' is what theology should be about, and that this should be something we can all agree on, even though some might wish to interpret this purported phenomenon in a very different ways.

1. The 'Coming of God' as a Linguistic Phenomenon – God-talk happens. And at the very least we can investigate its coming into being as a linguistic phenomenon. On this rendering we might talk of the coming of 'God' as the dawning of an awareness of God, or God-consciousness, and eventually explicit discourse about God. The phenomenon is real, and it is open to inquiry.
2. The 'Coming of God' as a Spiritual Phenomenon – Sensing the Divine. Individuals (from almost all cultures and backgrounds) claim times of special awareness of what they think of as 'God's presence'. Since this sense is usually not experienced as continuous, we can here too, think of these phenomena as forms of the coming of God. Where people claim a (perhaps mystical) sense of the divine, there we have another set of phenomena to inquire after.
3. The 'Coming of God' as an Existential Phenomenon – Experience of 'Revelation.' Quite apart from a general sense of a presence of God, some individuals report quite specific (sometimes dramatic) phenomena of 'illumination' or 'inspiration' that have a profound existential effect on their lives. Such experiences are often referred to as episodes of 'revelation'. As such (i.e. purported experiences of God's self-disclosure) they too are forms of the Coming of God.
4. The 'Coming of God' as an Empirical Phenomenon – Encounter with 'God.' Whatever we might wish to make of it, we also have reports and claims of individuals who believe that they

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Might not such reports be better (more naturalistically) understood? Would it not be better to start with some generally accepted philosophical or phenomenological analysis that could provide a rationale (or at least an opening) for later God-talk?

<sup>29</sup> For, in the first place, talk of the 'coming' of God seems to be in some tension with traditional philosophical/ theological notions of the omnipresence, a-temporality or aseity of God. In the second place, and for a different group (e.g. those influenced by process thought) talk of the coming of God might appear odd given God's consequent nature (i.e. God's structural relation to every actual entity as lure and possibility). Thirdly, there might be some who are worried about the 'supernaturalist' ring to such talk—is this an unqualified return to bland assertion of miracle as evidence for God?

<sup>30</sup> For whatever its problems, the notion that the Bible is the object of theology at least has the merit that nobody denies its very existence!

have experienced actual empirical (sensory) encounters with God. From stories in the Bible (e.g. Abraham, Moses, David) to contemporary accounts—we might speak of a theophany when the presence of God is experienced unambiguously as an empirical phenomenon. This too is a form of the ‘Coming of God’.

5. The ‘Coming of God’ as an Historical Phenomenon – Communal Interpretation. Not only do we have individuals claiming encounters with God, we have whole communities which derive their very existence from purposed events of the coming of God, and explain their whole identity in terms of these shared communal phenomena (e.g. Israel and Sinai; Christians and Bethlehem; Islam and Mecca, *et al*). These shared communal interpretations of the ‘coming of God,’ or ‘mighty acts of God’, are also part of the phenomenon we inquire after.

6. The ‘Coming of God’ as a Theological Phenomenon – The threefold Advent. Then, of course, we have the more fully elaborated theological account of the ‘Coming of God’, that in one way or another, has always been at the heart of Christian theology. For in its simplest and most essential form, Christians have always believed that God has come, comes, and will come again. We will, of course, have more to say about this below.

Suffice it to be said now, that the potential objection against making the phenomenon of the ‘coming of God’ the object of theology—that is that it would make the whole enterprise Quixotic—seems unnecessarily shrill; unless of course, one wishes to argue that theology in any form is but an exercise in ‘tilting at windmills’.<sup>31</sup> There seems to be no more reason for concern here, than with any of the other rival notions of the object of theology.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of how one might wish to interpret it, the ‘coming of God’ is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that can be inquired after. The believability of a robust theological account, rests in the clarity, simplicity, coherence, illuminative or explanatory power—yes, even beauty—of its articulation.

### *The ‘Advent’ as the Object of Theology*

At risk of caricature, but in the interests of brevity, there are basically three ‘live’ options (options that still exert influence today) with regard to the question of what theology should take to be its *concrete (immediate) object*: 1) it is the **World** (i.e. theology explores the evidence for God in the world; a view typical of classical Natural Theology); 2) it is **Religion** (i.e. theology is the study of the phenomenon of religion; a view typical of Liberal Theology); or 3) it is the **Bible**

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<sup>31</sup>Ever since the Enlightenment, theology has had to come to terms with the fact that its very Object (God) can no longer be simply taken for granted. Today theology cannot merely assume God’s existence, and move on quickly to talk about God’s character, will and activity. Any modern theology will have to give an account of precisely how it thinks it can come to know and talk about a God who is not in any self-evident way a simple ‘given’ of our experience. The task of doing so is usually assigned to a “doctrine of revelation” which is typically pushed up to the very ‘front end’ of a systematic theology.

<sup>32</sup>Which typically are: the *analogia entis* or ‘Great Chain of Being’ as in classical (Catholic) Thomism; the Bible as a propositional revelation vouchsafed by means of its supernatural mode of production as in (Fundamentalist/Evangelical) Protestantism; or religious experience as in post-Schleiermacher (Liberal) Protestantism.

(i.e. theology seeks to organize and collate the true propositions it contains; the view typical of Conservative Theology).<sup>33</sup> Since I find all three of these approaches (and resulting conceptions of God) problematic, I wish to suggest that a “more radically Adventist” Adventist theology has something distinctive to propose in this regard.

We start with what is (and only could be) a *discovery*. A discovery of GØD.<sup>34</sup> This GØD comes as an unexpected surprise! Unlike the “God” of our conventional discourse, to say nothing of the many gods of ancient or present times, GØD comes to us in order to gift us with GØD-SELF and with no ulterior motives. The coming of GØD is not a means to some other end (e.g. moral improvement, or restoration) but is the end (*telos* or goal) itself! GØD with us! This is the good news of the Bible. GØD is not the product of human reasoning about nature, nor a necessary corollary to religious experience, but the surprising ‘One who Comes.’ The GØD of the Bible is neither necessary (therefore “provable” in terms of our universal experience prior to GØD’s self-disclosure) nor unknowable (thus merely a presupposition of religious experience) nor merely communicating from afar (and so believed in merely per force of reputed claims and ecclesiastical authority)—despite the number of Adventists (like other Christians) who take one or another of these scenarios to be the case. Rather (and this is the thesis underlying the paper) it is the discovery that the GØD of the Bible discloses GØD-self as the **Coming GØD!** At the heart of the message of the Bible is the gratuitous fact of the Advent—the **Coming of GØD**. GØD is not simply *here or there* at our disposal, not simply *part of the cosmic furniture* whose existence we can therefore prove, not some obvious culturally endorsed *object of worship* of this or that (or even every) religion. NO! GØD is not an idol (i.e. a part, perhaps the highest part, of *reality* which we idolize). GØD comes! When we least expect it. When it is most surprising. In essence, the message of the Bible is that GØD *has come* (to Jews and Gentiles alike), *comes* (through the power of the Holy Spirit, e.g. in present events of worship and preaching, and also beyond the realm of the church) and *will come again* (fully, personally, as triune Lord of Glory for the whole world).

Therefore theology’s object must be the *coming of God*, that is the real personal coming, in our historical time and space, of the actual (but incarnate) presence of GØD (where we use

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<sup>33</sup>These three views correlate directly with three views of God’s Being: 1) **The Necessary God** (outside of time, demonstrably at the apex of the chain of being or world, unchangingly present everywhere and always)—what we might call (somewhat tongue in cheek) a “Big Brother” view of God; 2) **The Unknowable God** (i.e. the “Whence” of our religious experience, universally present but hidden and timeless)—what we might call (in similar vein) a “secret valentine” view of God; and 3) **The Communicating God** (i.e. the God who has sent us all sorts of messages in diverse ways and times to tell us all we need to know to be saved)—what we might call (with similar irreverence) the “e-mailer” view of God. The point is that our take on the, admittedly methodological, question of the object of theology, has a direct bearing on our substantive understanding of the God we claim to come to know in the process.

<sup>34</sup>The practice of putting a line through a word to denote that we do *not* mean what the word ordinarily means (yet have no other or better word for what we *do* mean) is a convention signaling our intent to point to what we cannot completely or properly comprehend or say in any other way—a convention that stems from Heidegger and those imitating his style, including but not limited to Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. (Having made the point, we will use ‘God’ for GØD later on again).

lower case letters—‘Gød’—to signify the real but hidden presence of GØD in incarnate form). And in light of the coming of Gød, we discover Gød to be “**Gød with us**”—that is to say that the actual character or *essential* nature of Gød is a “Gød who comes to be ‘Gød with us’,” and that this it is not simply a characteristic of how Gød just happens to *appear* to us.

Since this is not generally acknowledged as the core of the witness of Scripture, I have some explaining to do. In one sense, what I am suggesting is nothing new. Scripture has always been what it is. However, to suggest, as I am, that it is essentially (in and through all its diversity and complexity) a witness to the Advent of God, is to ask you to be willing to see the whole in a new way. This is akin to what Wittgenstein called the “dawning of an aspect.”<sup>35</sup> An aspect dawns on us when we notice a hitherto unnoticed aspect of the object we are looking at, that is, if we come to see it as something different. Thus we may pass from seeing a ‘puzzle picture’ as a mere collection of lines to seeing it as a face; or from seeing Jastrow’s ‘duck-rabbit’ as the picture of a duck to seeing it as the picture of a rabbit. Wittgenstein’s immediate aim was to dissolve the paradoxical appearance of aspect-dawning: when looking at a picture-object we can come to see it differently, although we also see that the object itself remains unchanged. It seems to have changed and yet seems not to have changed. Specifically, the ‘gestalt switch’ I am suggesting is a shift from seeing Scripture as a collection of diverse information *from* God, to seeing it as a (very diverse collection of) witnesses to the Coming *of* God in all its full complexity.

What then is the evidence for the ‘coming of Gød’<sup>36</sup> as the central witness of the Bible?

### *Biblical Witness to the ‘Coming of God’*

“*Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” Matthew 11:4, is the central question that revolved around Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, as recorded by the Gospel writers. Already in Isaiah we read “*Behold, your God will come . . . and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy*” (Isa. 35: 4ff).<sup>37</sup> In Luke’s account of Jesus ministry, which opens with his sermon at Nazareth, Jesus explicitly calls attention to this promise of God’s coming as the context in which to understand what he was about, and adds, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke 4:21. In fact, it would be all-too-

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<sup>35</sup>This term denotes a gamut of interrelated perceptual phenomena. See aphorism xi in book II of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The paradigmatic case is what Wittgenstein calls ‘aspect-dawning’ or ‘change of aspect’ (Aufleuchten eines Aspekts or Aspektwechsel): certain objects, especially schematic drawings — ‘picture-objects’ (PI II 194; LW I §§489) — can be seen under more than one aspect. From 1935 onwards, Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology returns time and again to seeing-as (TLP 5.5423; NB 9.11.14; BB 162–79; PI II 193–229; RPP I & II passim; LW I passim; LW II 12–17). Between 1947 and 1949, it dominates his work, partly under the influence of Köhler’s Gestalt psychology. See, Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>36</sup>Here is where we will leave the convention of crossing out “Gød” in favor of standard notation. But the point remains.

<sup>37</sup>KJV. Or as the Revised English Bible (REB) puts it, “Your God comes to save you”.

easy to point to the obvious centrality of the first and second advents in the New Testament as proof of our contention. Christ has come and will come again. The New Testament is about nothing if not the story of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, “God with us.” It would be very difficult to wrest from its pages the promise that “this same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” Acts 1:11, without unraveling the coherence of the whole account. It would be equally hard to deny that Hebrews 9:28 is a sort of summary of the gospel: “So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” If you add to this the Old Testament’s *eschatological* and *messianic* themes, then you have a very significant Biblical theme indeed.

But this just scratches the surface of what all is involved with the notion of the “coming God.” It is not just the fact that the idea of the coming (and coming again) of God is a central theme in the Bible. Rather, the claim I am putting forward, is that in the Bible the *very idea of God* is inseparable from the notion of God’s coming. God is understood, always and everywhere as the *coming God*. To fully make this point clear we would have to traverse a wide range of Biblical territory. But here we can only make a few general comments.

The first point to be made is that the Bible is quite unlike Greek philosophy. There is no philosophical (or even theological) speculation about the existence or nature of a Supreme Being, a Prime Mover, or First Cause. There is nothing about God as a necessary being. There are no proofs for God’s existence.<sup>38</sup> No arguments as to why we should believe in God based on the fact of the world’s existence, or features of the world, or experience in the world. God’s existence is simply announced—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” Gen 1:1.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, this coming of God seems to take place at specific times and places, not just anywhere and everywhere. This is the case throughout the Bible, from Abraham through Paul, to John the Revelator. So, for example, we read “Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.”<sup>40</sup> By my account there are at least four major occasions in which “the LORD”

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<sup>38</sup>We need to remember that statements like Psalm 14:1 & 53:1, “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’”, are not really claims to atheism as we know it, but rather speak of wicked persons who try to live “as if” there were no God. At any rate there is no Biblical attempt to prove them wrong at all! Cf. the NRSV rendering of Psalm 10:4 “In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are, ‘There is no God.’”

<sup>39</sup>Or perhaps, we should quote Exodus 3:2-4: “There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush . . . God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” For, as Biblical scholars have pointed out, the real starting point of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is the Exodus, and behind that, in the distant past, the stories of the patriarchs starting with the call of Abraham (where once again God comes to him “out of the blue, so to speak”). The creation story and its aftermath is theological reflection in light of these events. If this is so, it reinforces the point we are making. The Bible itself has its origin in the event of coming of God to Moses (Exodus 3:2-4) and behind that the recounting of the appearances of God to Abraham and the other patriarchs.

<sup>40</sup>Gen 12:7.

appeared to Abraham in Genesis.<sup>41</sup> Jacob even names the place the Lord appeared to him.<sup>42</sup> Jumping to the New Testament, for Paul it was on the Damascus road: Act 9:27 “But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.”<sup>43</sup> For John it was “on the isle called Patmos” that the Word of the Lord came to him.<sup>44</sup>

Thirdly, despite all these specific and diverse accounts of the coming or appearing of God in Scripture, there is something else that presents itself as well. It is the emerging of an *overall structure or form*. While I have argued that the “coming of God” is the central reality of Adventist belief, it is not simply a future expectation but rather the most fundamental thing we can know of God—our God is a coming God.<sup>45</sup> Indeed as Christians (and particularly as *Adventist* Christians), we confess that at the heart of our faith stands the messianic event of “God with Us”—*Emmanuel*—Jesus Christ. Here we have to do with the heart of the Christian gospel, the center of God's dealings with humanity. But this does not encompass the whole story. It was preceded by an earlier form of God's coming (in Creation and Covenant as witnessed to in the First or Old Testament) that prepared the way for the incarnation (or embodiment of God as witnessed to in the Second or New Testament), and it will be succeeded by a future consummation of God's primordial purpose in the final unity of God and humanity in the New Kingdom to come. God's coming then is to be properly understood as unfolding in three great cosmic movements. God has come to us in Creation and Covenant. God came to us in a new and deeper form in the event of incarnation in Jesus the Messiah. And God will come to us again (again in new form) in the final climax of the ages—the return of Christ—an event prefigured in the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. These three movements interpret each other. We are to understand Jesus the Messiah as “fulfillment” of the messianic Creation/Covenant promise made in the beginning, and as itself a “promise” of a future messianic fulfilment in the Consummation. We are to interpret the initial promise (Creation and Covenant) in the light of its initial fulfilment in Jesus Christ and

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<sup>41</sup>Genesis chapters 12, 15, 17, 18, 22.

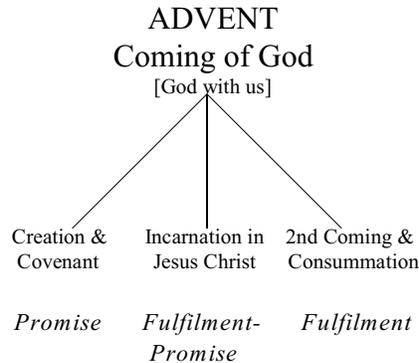
<sup>42</sup>Gen 28:16-19 “Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.” See also, Gen 32:1-2 “And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This *is* God's host [army or camp]; and he called the name of that place Mahanaim.”

<sup>43</sup>It is interesting to note that this experience is the *only* recorded one in the whole life of Paul that has the character of an epiphany (divine self-disclosure). After this we are told that Paul spent three years on his own in Arabia working out the theological implications of this revelation before beginning his public ministry. After this we read only of his experience of a dream in which he saw a Macedonian calling for help (Acts 16:9)—an experience not unlike those we all can identify with.

<sup>44</sup>See Rev.1:9-10. Once again, this is the only record we have of anything like our typical picture of epiphany in the life of John (be that the disciple or the “other” John, perhaps John of Ephesus or some other).

<sup>45</sup>All Christian thinking takes its starting point from *God's coming to us*. For without God's initiative in moving towards us, we would know nothing at all about God, very little of ourselves and the purpose of our lives.

final fulfilment in the coming Messianic Kingdom. We are to see the Coming Kingdom (i.e. promise-fulfilment), in turn, in the light of the first two forms (i.e. promise, & fulfilment-promise) of God's coming.<sup>46</sup> We call this the essential 'reflexive equilibrium' that allows rigorous theological thought to take place. Here we have it in chart form:—



Fourthly, the coming of God implies both God's presence *and* God's absence. You cannot have the one without the other. "Coming" would not make sense if we did not, at least in some sense, talk about "absence" as well. While the Bible affirms (in a practical rather than theoretical sense) a "divine omnipresence"<sup>47</sup> it does not argue for a "fixed permanent accessible presence" of God as does the idolatry around it. Moreover, Scripture directly affirms the notion of "divine absence." The book of Job tells a story of an intentional absence of God, while two of the Gospels recount the astonishing words of Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the story in Luke 24 of the disciples on the Emmaus road after the resurrection, captures best of all this sense of both the presence and absence of God. Any Adventist spirituality that wished to be true to its own historical founding moment (Great Disappointment), and relevant to the mood of our post-modern world, would be well advised to pay careful attention to this dialectic of presence and absence so powerfully articulated in Scripture.

### *Essential Qualifications and Clarifications*

Before moving on to implications, some essential qualifications, observations and explanations.

1. To call for a more radically "Adventist" Adventism is not simply a call for a more eschatologically (or even apocalyptically) focused theology. While I am aware of (and I have been influenced by) some of the powerful movements of eschatological renewal in 20<sup>th</sup> century theology and Biblical Studies, the line of thought reflected in this paper should not be regarded as simply

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<sup>46</sup>For more on this use of a promise-fulfillment structure see Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

<sup>47</sup>E.g. Psalms 139:7-8 (NRSV) "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol [the grave], you are there."

<sup>48</sup>Mat 27:46; Mark 15:34.

an Adventist appropriation of these broader tendencies.<sup>49</sup> In essential ways, it is more a movement in the other direction. From eschatology to history. From the future back to the past and present. From the ‘adventist distinctives’ to the ‘eternal verities’ (without loss of the former). Adventism has, *prima facie*, been preoccupied with the future. Eschatology is in our DNA. This is fine. But as Jesus said in another context: “these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” (Matt 23:23).

2. To argue that the “Advent” should be at the heart of Adventism, is not simply a call to make the *theme* of the Advent of central importance. This is not just about thematic priority or dominance. This is not merely a ‘systematic’ problem in that sense. It is a proposal about substance, about what theology is *about*. This is what is meant by calling the Advent the Object of theology.

3. Is all this merely making a virtue out of a necessity? Are we saddled historically with this advent thing, and just trying to make the best of it?<sup>50</sup> Is this some sort of reveling in our sectarian corner? Not at all. There is nothing sectarian about the doctrine of the Advent. What I *would* be willing to admit is that I am explicitly drawing on the history, language, concepts and experience of my own faith community.<sup>51</sup> Is this not precisely the virtue of our post-modern willingness to listen to minority voices? I am doing so, however, only to make a very orthodox and ecumenical move—I am calling on Adventism to be even more Christocentric, grace-oriented, trinitarian, Biblical, etc. I will also freely admit that similar calls have been made by others in the recent history of theology, albeit using different language and concepts.

4. Finally, another potential objection. Fine, but isn’t the Adventist (denominational) distinctive the *immanence* of the Advent? Yes and no. The soon return of Jesus is a clear Biblical teaching, and all Christians have had to grapple with this issue. Certainly, the initial focus in Adventism was on the immanence of the event. But haven’t we learnt our lesson with date-setting? I would argue that a more comprehensive understanding of the Advent helps explain how the Coming of God is always something that has happened in the past, can happen in the present and will happen again in the future. We live in the ‘already and the not yet’ (in the *zwischenzeit* as the Germans would say).

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<sup>49</sup> I think particularly of the ‘realized eschatology’ of C. H. Dodd; the ‘radical eschatology’ of an Albert Schweitzer, or Franz Overbeck; or the eschatological existentialism of the early Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, in the early part of the century. Particularly influential for me personally is the more recent turn to eschatology by the likes of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhard Pannenberg, in the latter part of the century. In particular, Moltmann’s systematic theology which he characterized as a “Messianic Theology” remains a singular achievement and stimulus.

<sup>50</sup> This was in fact the probing question Karl Barth asked in an analogous situation about his Catholic colleague and friend, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s attempt to make good on the Roman Catholic Marian Dogma! In defense, I would point out that unlike the debated doctrines of the immaculate conception and assumption of Mary, and her status as co-redemptrix—the doctrine of the first and second comings of Christ have been held by the church universal from the very beginning.

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the secret to the success of TV programs like “Antique Roadshow” on PBS, is the fascination and thrill of discovering that one has unknowingly had something of particular value lying around unnoticed in one’s own backyard, attic or garage for far too long.

#### IV. A More Radically Adventist Theology

So what? Does any of the above make a difference, that really makes a difference? In the first place, I believe that it makes a significant difference for Adventist theology. I will try to address some of these issues here. In the second place, I believe it will make a difference for Adventist praxis. I will conclude with this issue in the final section of the paper.

##### *Doctrinal Paradigm Shift—Thinking Differently About Doctrines*

Conventionally we have tended to think about doctrines as interrelated, yet relatively discrete, bundles of propositional truth. We handle them individually, but typically order them in some logical fashion or other. We treat them something like beads on a chain. We might think that one or more of these beliefs are core, and others are more peripheral. But we fret that if we tamper too much, or one becomes weak or broken, the whole chain might fall to pieces. This way of thinking tends to reinforce a basic uneasiness with any attempt at doctrinal change.

However, one of the payoffs of what we have proposed in this paper is a new way of thinking about doctrine. If the Advent of God is not merely one doctrine among others *but itself the object of theology* then a new way of conceiving the whole presents itself. Rather than a chain of belief, we can envision a central phenomenon and a concentric array of perspectives on that phenomenon, like a wheel with its central hub and radiating spokes. To change metaphors, we can think of the Advent (God with us) as a multifaceted jewel in the center, with each doctrine as a discrete ‘window’ or perspective on one of its facets. This would also allow us to come to grips with the difficult problem of doctrinal change. The jewel remains the same, while we constantly search for better ways, concepts, and language to convey its truth. Constancy and change. We *can* affirm both.

##### *New Ways to Move Beyond Old Impasses*

I will briefly list some of the old impasses Adventist theology has found itself in, and might now be open to new ways forward:

1. A focus on the Advent (a single, yet complex, movement of God with us) as itself the gospel and salvation, suggests a way beyond the impasse between Cross (past salvation) and *Eschatos* (future salvation) for both are but acts in a single drama.

2. A focus on the Advent allows us to be consistently Christ-centered, yet still distinctively “Adventist”.

3. This paradigm shift also hold out new hope for the potential healing of the rift between ‘right’ and ‘left’ in Adventism. It is not the Bible *per se* that is the object of our faith; but the Advent of God itself; to which the Bible is the indispensable witness. Here the Advent is the Object, and the Bible is the Source.

4. A new way for us to be sincerely ecumenical and yet truly distinctive suggests itself. Ecumenical because we do not have the Advent to ourselves—distinctive because it changes the way we understand God, ourselves, history and cosmic destiny.

*A New Way of Understanding and Confessing our Faith*

Of course, the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. So in what follows I will try to give a highly abbreviated, yet carefully restructured, account of what some key notions will look like given the methodological paradigm shift argued for in this paper.

- *Advent*

The Advent of God is a single (yet complex) purported event. Christian theology is the ongoing attempt to *interpret* this event. The Advent of God is thus the object and subject-matter of Christian theology. Viewed one way (i.e. from what we might construe as a God's eye perspective) it is a single sustained movement of *God with us* (for all its complex unfolding and deepening subtlety). Viewed another way (i.e. from our temporally structured perspective) while it is a single 'play', it unfolds in three grand 'acts' (Creation, Incarnation, Consummation). From both perspectives the Advent of God is God's free act of self-sharing love, wherein God graciously encounters us as creatures (addressing us with a Word of both judgment & salvation); giving God-self to us (in covenant and incarnation) and adopting us to God-self (through resurrection; ascension; and glorification). It is thus both an act of revelation and salvation. And not merely as a means to some other end, for it is itself the *telos* (goal) of all the ways of God. Advent—Emmanuel: God with us, and us with God, for eternity. *This* is the Christian Gospel. We are commissioned to join the past and present crowd of witnesses that are called to proclaim it 'to every kindred, nation, tongue and people.' "We are Christ's ambassadors". (2 Cor. 5:20).

- *Bible*

But we are not alone in this ambassadorial witness, nor are we the original witnesses. That honor goes to the prophets and apostles of Holy Scripture. The Bible is the human witness to the Advent of God (i.e. the Gospel). As such it is irreplaceable and normative. We have no other means of access to the Word of God (i.e. Advent) than through its witness. Herein (rather than in its 'mode of production'), lies its unique status as our only norm of faith and practice. We call it the "written word of God" in that it points to the Living Word of God. Of course, the Bible is also (secondarily, but at the same time) a record of these witnesses' more or less successful attempts at restructuring all of life in light of the Coming of God. We gratefully learn from their efforts as we try to do analogously in our time what they did in theirs. (It is also true, in third place, that the Bible incidentally and unintentionally conveys bits and pieces of geographical, cultural, historical, scientific and even religious information. As such it might be of interest to theology and other disciplines as it gives insight into how ancient peoples viewed a host of things. However, this incidental contribution is not why we read the Bible as *Holy Scripture!*). We take the Bible then to be "treasure in earthen vessels." 2 Cor 4:7.

- *Mission*

Learning to distinguish between these four referential components (levels of meaning, as adduced above) is critical to the mission of the Christian Church. For: 1. We are commissioned to share the good news of the **Actual Advent of God** to every nation, group and person. 2. Those with whom we share this news, may well wish to check out the sources for themselves (the **Bible as Witness**). 3. Turning to the Scriptures for instruction and reproof will only make sense if they too, like us, choose to believe the gospel and then pursue what might need to be changed in their own culture and lives, in light of it. To that end they will turn to the **Bible as Case Study** to see how the original and adopted ‘people of God’ attempted to bring their culture and practice into line with the Advent of God. We will certainly be open to discussing with them what we have learned from our own experiences, both our successes and our failures. But we will not be prescriptive. “Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. . . Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another . . . Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Rom 14:5, 13; 15:7)

- *Religion*

The Advent of God reaches us where we are. We are *homo religiosus*. In the light of the Coming of God, religion is both exposed and judged as an ultimately pathetic and futile (but also noble and heroic!) human attempt to secure and justify ourselves in the face of perceptions of power and powerlessness that constantly confront us. But in the light of the same Coming of God, ‘religion’ is also to be recognized as an appropriate sphere, or form, of human life within which to respond to the reconciling and sanctifying presence of God with us. While all religions (Christianity included!) are therefore exposed as forms of human hubris (exaggerated pride or self-confidence), sloth (despair), and deceit (error), no religion can be excluded in principle (Christianity included) from being part of ‘true religion’ if it provides a form for appropriate response to the gracious Coming of God. The *signature* of such an appropriate response invariably involves an acknowledgment of human brokenness (humility), a stirring into action for righteousness sake (hope), and an opening toward the excluded Other (hospitality)—i.e. what the Bible calls *faith, hope & charity (or love)* 1 Cor 13. Christians believe that the paradigmatic example (if not the *only* pure example) in human history of ‘true religion’—has been the religion of the man Jesus Christ. The Church, on the other hand, has to be content to live as *simul justus et peccator*. Furthermore, and once again in the light of the Coming of God, the Church is commissioned to co-opt the realm of religion for the sake of the Gospel.<sup>52</sup>

- *The Triune God*

The Advent of God tells us something we could never have told ourselves: the good news that God is the ‘One who loves in freedom’ (Barth), and that God is *this* for us too as Emmanuel—God with us as Father, Son and Spirit.

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<sup>52</sup>Anyone who has read §17 of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* will have no difficulty in seeing the influence of his thought in this section.

1. God is (and could only be) *revealed* through Godself—that is through the Word of God, the Logos, or self-expression of God. This is what Scripture witnesses to in the event of Jesus Christ as **Son** of God (an event which temporally stretches from Creation to Consummation)<sup>53</sup>. We have to acknowledge that, strictly speaking, God *could only be known* through such an act of self-disclosure. There is no way from us to God (“from below”), but only from God to us (“from above”)<sup>54</sup>. God is gracious to us. This means, God’s personal giving of Godself takes place in such a way that it corresponds with our mode of knowing another subject (the mode of personal encounter).

2. But God is *present* everywhere—in ‘veiled’ or ‘hidden’, but real, form—this is what Scripture is testifying to in calling God, our “**Father**.” God reveals Godself as the Creator. This means that everything that is: comes from God (God as source of all, i.e. Divine Parent); depends on God for life and sustenance (God as provider and sustainer of all that is, i.e. Divine Providence); and could not escape from the presence of God even if it were to wish to do so (God as omnipresent, i.e. “Source, Guide and Goal of all things”<sup>55</sup>). So, in light of this we have to affirm that God could (in principle) be *perceived* (i.e. ‘sensed,’ ‘discerned,’ ‘noticed’) everywhere and anywhere, for there is nowhere that God is not.<sup>56</sup>

3. And then, thirdly, we discern and acknowledge that God is free to *act* anywhere and everywhere that God wishes to act, for God is the One who loves in *freedom*. Without the active work of God, making Godself known as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer we would not be able to know God at all. But God *is* known because God acts to make Godself known. This action of

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<sup>53</sup> "For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." 1 Tim. 2:5. Cf. "From everlasting He was the Mediator of the covenant, the one in whom all nations of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles . . . were to be blessed." E. G. White, *Review and Herald*, April 5, 1906.

<sup>54</sup>This simple schematization (‘from below’ versus ‘from above’) has a point to make, but it is ultimately too simplistic. For any real, historical, knowledge of God (the “Wholly Other”) would have to be simultaneously ‘from below’ (if it was to be human knowledge) and ‘from above’ (if it was to be genuine knowledge of *GOD*). The classical Christian answer to this problem is to insist that, for this reason, true knowledge of God is only to be found in the event of Jesus Christ—where ‘from below’ (*vere homo*) and ‘from above’ (*vere deus*) come together as one.

<sup>55</sup>Rom 11:36, NEB. Cf. “For from him and through him and to him are all things”. Rom 11:36 NRSV.

<sup>56</sup>See, Act 17:28 “For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'" NRSV. This text authorizes the careful use of the analogy of ‘womb’ and ‘birth’ with respect to this dimension of the God-world relation. In some sense it is appropriate to think of the whole of creation as embryo and then fetus and then child *within* the womb of God. By rights God’s ‘Being’ (or reality) fills all in all. ‘Before creation’ there is no reality but God. Creation itself therefore has a *kenotic* dimension. God (without ceasing to be all in all) makes space for reality relatively independent from Godself. But since there is no reality outside of God, we can only think of this relatively autonomous space as ‘within’ God. Thus just as a Mother ‘makes space’ within her own body for the relative autonomy of her offspring, so God makes space for us to exist, not apart from but in the presence of Godself. But just like the human child, while relatively autonomous (not even sharing the same blood supply), is totally dependent on the mother, so we too totally depend on God for our very existence. Furthermore, just like the baby is ‘surrounded’ by the Mother, so we are ‘surrounded’ by God’s presence. There is nowhere we can go to escape the presence of God.

God, this active presence of God with and in us is what Scripture witnesses to as the **Spirit** of God.<sup>57</sup> The Spirit is at work both within the church, and without, and knows no boundary.<sup>58</sup> While it is always hard to know for sure how, where, and when the Spirit acts, the traces of the acts of God will always bear a recognizable signature; an ascertainable pattern. So we should always be ready to discern (and praise God) for the movements of God's Spirit that outpace us and surprise us.

Finally, we need to remember that while we can thus discern and distinguish between these three modes of God with us—through contingent events of personal self-disclosure in our historical time and space as Savior and Lord; through the universal “background radiation” of God's presence as Creator; and through the free movement of God's Spirit in specific acts and moments of Illumination and Redemption—they are, in the end, indivisibly and without separation, the one event of the Advent (or Coming) of God to us. For God is God with us, and that means in Word (Son), Act (Spirit), and Being (Father). And these three cannot be separated. For where God is (Being), there God loves (Act) and there God addresses or speaks judgment and salvation to us (Word). God's triune reality as “Father, Son and Spirit” is thus at once, *that* which is revealed (the *content* of revelation), the *revelation* itself (the *modus operandi* of revelation), and the *revealdness* of revelation (i.e. the actual reaching of the goal—a partial but real human knowledge of God—the reason we can, however partially, speak truly of God).<sup>59</sup> “And because you are children, God has sent the **Spirit** of his **Son** into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! **Father!**’” Gal 4:6 NRSV.

- *Revelation*

The Advent of God is the revelation of the triune God as God with us. This is a great mystery! How could the Eternal, Infinite and Wholly Other be known at all, however partially and brokenly!? We exist in time. We are finite. And we are not an emanation or derivative of God. We are not God. We are fundamentally distinct from God. How then is the knowledge of God (revelation) possible? Only if its possibility resides in Godself. The ontological gulf can only be bridged from God's side.

The gospel claims that this has indeed happened. The Eternal God is known by us, but only in moments of illumination of our minds by the Holy Spirit. Yes, known by us—temporal beings

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<sup>57</sup> See, Joh 3:8 “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

<sup>58</sup> See Acts 8 where even the representative of the non-Greco-Roman world, the Ethiopian Eunuch, is encountered by the Spirit; Acts 9 (dramatic conversion of Saul, a Jewish persecutor); and Acts 9-10 (Gentiles receive the Spirit too).

<sup>59</sup> Thus, the Christian doctrine of the *Trinity* tells us: who God is (the One who loves in freedom); why it is we can know God (because God can be free to be God with us too); and how it is that we come to know God (through God's universal presence, God's contingent but general acts, and supremely through God's specific historical self-disclosure).

—albeit only momentarily and analogically. *How* this has happened can be a topic of theological reflection (rather than a springboard for philosophical speculation) only to the degree that we faithfully follow *a posteriori* the actuality of such a happening. Rather than borrowing from the pagan phenomenology of divination (i.e. the Oracle of Delphi), or the religious experience of ecstasy (i.e. which can be seen even in some Biblical accounts of prophetic experience, e.g. Saul, etc.), or the Bible’s description of ‘dreams and visions’ (i.e. of Joseph and Daniel, but also of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar), a biblically sound theological account of revelation will note that its essence is to be seen in the multiplex “condescension” or “accommodation” of God to our reality and limitations.<sup>60</sup>

I believe that we can discern six fundamental logical (rather than chronological) moves or “analogical steps” of God towards us (see accompanying chart):—

From the Wholly Other, Eternal, Infinite GOD, via . . .

*Election* (God’s primordial self-determination to be ‘God with us’);<sup>61</sup>

*Creation/Covenant* (God’s self-expression in space-time);

*Incarnation* (God’s self-expression in the flesh—the Living Word of God);

*Primary Witness* (Scripture—original witnesses called, inspired, and commissioned to witness the Advent of God, a witness borne and recorded in the texts of the Bible—the Written Word of God);

*Secondary Witness* (Church—made up of those called to bear witness to the original witness, throughout history, and expressed in Church tradition and doctrine—the Taught Word of God);<sup>62</sup>

*Tertiary Witness* (Proclamation—contemporary preaching, sacrament and service, aimed at the interpretation and application of the Word of God to the present situation—the Proclaimed Word of God);

. . . to a contingent, temporal, finite human being—where finally, an individual in a specific time and place, hears and grasps something (however limited) of the truth of God’s self-disclosure.

Each of these analogical steps is the work of the Holy Spirit. In each “move” God comes closer to me, but in each move a greater accommodation has to be made—if ever the Eternal, Unknowable, Ineffable, Wholly Other GØD is to be truly known by me (finite, temporal, feeble and fallible creature). But this is what it takes for revelation to be revelation. There is no knowledge of

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<sup>60</sup>“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Phil 2: 5-8 NRSV.

<sup>61</sup>“Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an **eternal gospel** to proclaim to those who live on the earth -- to every nation and tribe and language and people.” Rev 14: 6.

<sup>62</sup>This includes the “Spirit of Prophecy”. Cf. Ellen White’s repeated understanding of her work as a “lesser light” that points to the “greater light” (Scripture).

God apart from revelation and no revelation apart from a “hiding, veiling or condescending” of God. What starts out as the perfect objective self-knowledge of God can become (by grace alone) a momentary, actual, limited but real event of illumination and inspiration—a moment of revelation—in which I really grasp something of the reality of God’s glory and will. No one becomes, or is, a Christian without receiving revelation.<sup>63</sup>

The first three moves are God’s alone and climax in the incarnation of Jesus (who is, as such, *vere deus et vere homo*). The last three moves are within the human realm, but by the agency of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, moving backwards: I only believe because of the testimony of my peers (the Word of God, proclaimed to me); But they only witness on the authority of those who have gone before in the church (the Word of God, taught); But their faith rests solely on those prophets and apostles who are the primary witnesses (the Biblical writers, the Written Word of God); But they too have only derivative authority, for they too are only witness—witnesses to the actual Advent of God itself (the Living, Acting and Speaking Word of God incarnate in Jesus, Israel’s Messiah).

Thus, there is no such a thing as a separate “Natural Revelation” (ostensibly in Nature) distinguishable from a “Personal Revelation” (purportedly in Scripture). All revelation is *both* natural (i.e. in this world of time and space, or we could never know it) *and* personal (i.e. the result of personal and active self-disclosure, or it would never be knowledge of God), simultaneously. Moreover, the distinction between so-called “general revelation” and “special revelation” is also misleading. For as presented above the *one movement* of the Advent of God involves *both* ‘general’ (creation & covenant) and ‘special’ steps (incarnation & witnesses). Therefore, Christians should never be surprised to see and recognize, “parables of the Kingdom”, analogies and metaphors of the gospel far beyond the boundaries of the church.

## V. Toward a Messianic Advent Movement

*“As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future,  
as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future,  
of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience.*

*Someone is to come, is **now** to come.*

*Justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other, with the promise. . .  
This universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming,  
and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice  
—this is what I call the messianic structure.”*

Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p.22-23

Finally, I wish to return to the question of the central narrative of Adventism. What might the Advent Movement look like, if we were to follow the line we have been tracing in this

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. “He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Matt 16:15-17

paper? For many, particularly young people, there is a sense of optimism that we are at a *kairos* moment in history. That a “more radically ‘Adventist’ Adventism” might just be possible.

I will do so by way of appropriation of the “messianic” concept, much discussed in recent philosophy and theology.<sup>64</sup> Here then is a concise statement that attempts to characterize the vision I have in mind:

*By “Messianic Adventism” I mean a movement that is characterized in both belief and practice chiefly by an open, hopeful expectation of the consummation of the coming of God.*

*This **adventus Dei** commenced in and with Creation Sabbath; was reiterated after the fall; and then gradually made more explicit through an extended sequence of messianic promises to Israel. This promise was both fulfilled and reinaugurated in Jesus Christ, who came not only as Israel’s Messiah but also as the very incarnation of the coming God and thus, as such, the proleptic inauguration of the messianic kingdom to come. As ‘ecclesia’ we are continually called to “come out of her” (i.e. come out of our Babylonian captivity/conformity to xenophobic, rigidly-bounded communities of one sort or another) in order to become ‘un-bounded xenotropic messianic communities of the coming God’—a future reality **from which** we live, though never fully realized in the present. This ‘messianic expectation’ structures our lives not only diachronically but also synchronically—we are called into participation with the coming God in the temporal and partial realization of ‘koinonia’ in the here and now. This means an open, welcoming messianic community committed to the other for the sake of the Other as that Someone who is to come.*

In what follows I will attempt some brief explications of the notions employed above.

- “An *open*, hopeful expectation of the consummation of the coming of God.” To expect a coming messiah is to be *open*—open to the future, open to each other, open to an Other. There can be no place for a *messiah* in a closed system. The essential character of the Biblical narrative is that it is ‘messianically structured’, that is that is it radically open rather than closed.
- “An open, *hopeful* expectation of the consummation of the coming of God.” To expect a coming Messiah is to *hope*. Real hope is not just some sort of wishful thinking. It is a radical, life-transforming, future oriented, courageous, risky business. To believe in the Messiah is to risk one’s whole life on that One who is to come.
- “An open, hopeful *expectation* of the consummation of the coming of God.” To hope for the coming Messiah, however, is not without grounds (i.e. evidence). It is an *expectation*, not a mere

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<sup>64</sup>See the recent work of Moltmann and Derrida.

longing. It is expected, not simply projected. The coming Messiah is the Messiah who has already come. Having come he will come again.

■ “An open, hopeful expectation of the *consummation* of the coming of God.” To await the return of the Messiah, is to await the *consummation* of the coming of God, not its inauguration. It is a popular misconception to think of Christians, in contrast to Jews, as no longer expecting a coming Messiah. This is not correct—we do too. However, it is in terms of ‘consummation’ rather than ‘initiation’ that such anticipation runs.

■ “An open, hopeful expectation of the consummation of the *coming of God*.” As we have argued above, the “coming of God” is the central reality of Adventist belief. It is not simply a future expectation but the most fundamental thing we can know of God—our God is a coming God—past, present and future.

■ “This **adventus Dei** commenced in and with Creation Sabbath; was reiterated after the fall; and then made explicit through an extended sequence of messianic promises to Israel.” The *adventus Dei* or coming of God creates the promise–fulfilment(promise)–fulfilment structure of messianic hope. Already, on the seventh day of the creation story, the messianic promise has been given. For the Sabbath is a prefigurement of the Messiah and messianic kingdom to come.

■ “This promise was both fulfilled and reinaugurated in Jesus Christ, who came not only as Israel’s Messiah but also as the very incarnation of the coming God and thus, as such, the proleptic inauguration of the messianic kingdom to come.” There can be little surprise in the fact that for Christians Jesus Christ is the Messiah. In fact, and this may be less well known, the very word *Christ*, meaning “anointed one” is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew word— Messiah. Thus to say “Jesus Christ” is the same as saying Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is indeed the fulfilment of the covenant promises to Israel—the faithful covenant partner who brings the covenant to its goal. However, and here lies the unexpected dimension, *at the same time* he is the inauguration of a new promise (which was contained in the old promise, of course) that propels us forward once again to a new and deeper fulfilment of the messianic hope. Jesus who came as Saviour will come again as King of Kings. This new dimension lies in the fact of the *incarnation*— “In him dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9). A fact that is the basis for the promise that we will become “partakers of the divine nature” 2 Peter 1:4 (or “share in the very being of God” as the NEB and REB put it). As Paul states it in 1 Cor 2:7 “I speak God’s hidden wisdom, his secret purpose framed from the very beginning to bring us to our destined glory,” and earlier “It is God himself who called you to share in the life of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and God keeps faith” 1 Cor 1:9 (REB). By “proleptic” we mean the partial, but real, inauguration of that which is to come. Thus in Jesus Christ the messianic kingdom *has already dawned* even if its fulness is yet to come.

■ “As ‘ecclesia’ we are continually called to “*come out of her*” (*i.e. come out of our Babylonian captivity/conformity to xenophobic, rigidly-bounded communities of one sort or another*) . . .” To be “church” is to be *ecclesia* or “called out”. The question is “called out” from what? Con-

ventionally, this is understood as being “called out of the world.” But Adventists, rightly stressing the particular apocalyptic setting of this call, have pointed out that it is more specific — the call is to “come out of Babylon” (Rev 18:1-4). Here the obvious reference is to the Babylonian captivity of Israel (6<sup>th</sup> cent BC). But “Babylon” comes to represent not only the enemy *of*, but also the great alternative/temptation *for* God’s people. How come? Because, once the shock of captivity wore off, life in Babylon was not so bad at all—in fact when the time for the return came (Dan 9:2, Jeremiah 25:11,12; 20:10, etc) perhaps the majority of the people chose *not to return*. It seemed possible to them to serve God (the synagogues standing in for the temple) *and* enjoy the comforts and pleasures of Babylon. This is captured in the apocalyptic wording of Revelation 18-19. The irony must not be lost—the call is to exit the exiled state! Freedom from captivity! The community of the church is to be quite different from all other human communities. A community is a community by distinguishing itself from other communities. The church becomes a community only to the degree that it lives by the coming unity which is not yet fully present. As such it opposes all forms of “Babylonian captivity/conformity” to segregated, separating, others-fearing communities. It rejects all barriers and distinctions that drive us apart and rigidly separate us—barriers of race, gender, class, sex, ethnicity, culture, health, wealth, goodness, etc. In the church only one distinction fundamentally matters, that is the distinction between God and us—and that *very real* distinction *has been (astonishingly) itself overcome by God, for us, in Christ!*

■ “As ‘ecclesia’ we are continually called to “come out of her” (i.e. come out of our Babylonian captivity/conformity to xenophobic, rigidly-bounded communities of one sort or another) *in order to become ‘unbounded xenotropic messianic communities of the coming God’ . . .*” The church of the Messiah is to know no bounds of nation, tribe, tongue or people groups. It is in principle unbounded, universal. The distinction between those who know and accept the reality of the church, and those who do not yet know and/or reject this reality, is only a fluid distinction and one that we must constantly pray will be overcome by God’s grace. The church must be xenotropic—that is *others* seeking and affirming. Not only does this mean that *mission* is central to the life of the church, but that this mission is the message of universal reconciliation. Of course, this reconciliation is *truth and reconciliation!* There cannot be reconciliation where there is ongoing injustice and abuse. The church must speak the prophetic NO for the sake of the evangelistic YES.

■ “As ‘ecclesia’ we are continually called to “come out of her” (i.e. come out of our Babylonian captivity/conformity to xenophobic, rigidly-bounded communities of one sort or another) in order to become ‘unbounded xenotropic messianic communities of the coming God’—*a future reality from which we live, though never fully realized in the present.*” As church we are called to be the messianic community that lives ‘between the times’—in the light of the ‘having already come’ reality of Jesus as Messiah, and the ‘still to be consummated’ reality of his messianic kingdom. What is important is to recognize that we live *from* the future. It is the future which constitutes the present and the present that determines the past. This is, of course, counter-intuitive. We normally think that the past determines the present which in turn shapes the future. But it is essential to the dynamic of messianic existence that it is in fact the future which,

proleptically revealed in history in Jesus Christ (i.e. particularly in his resurrection from the dead), which constitutes the present. As we understand and live by the promise of the future reality, we constitute the present quite differently than if we did not believe and live by the promise. Not only the present but also the meaning, significance and import of the past changes with our actions in the present. This is a difficult and complex philosophical problem that we cannot do justice to here.<sup>65</sup> Suffice to say here, that this teleological structure of existence is essential to the meaning of “messianic” theology.

■ “This ‘messianic expectation’ structures our lives not only diachronically but also synchronically—we are called into participation with the coming God in the temporal and partial realization of ‘koinonia’ in the here and now.” Messianic existence is not only expectation of a future reality (i.e. a *diachronic*, or ‘over-time’ existence), it is also a particular way of living in the present (i.e. a *synchronic* or ‘in-time’, at-the-present moment kind of existence). Since we are to be radically open to the future, we are at the same time called to be radically open to the other in the present. This is the ‘participation with Christ’ that is our vocation. It will always be only a temporal and thus partial realization of the full reality of *koinonia* fellowship, but it *will* be a foretaste of that new kind of existence.

■ “This means an open, expanding messianic community committed to the other for the sake of the Other as that Someone who is to come.” Messianic community is not only ‘vertically’ but also ‘horizontally’ oriented. A messianic community must be an *open* community. Of course, not totally undefined as this would mean the loss of community itself. But rather a community with a *permeable* boundary. In principle, all humanity (in fact, more than just humanity) belong to the community of the messiah. In practice, all those who accept the reality of the community and wish to belong to it, may. This is not the place to trace out the dynamics and practices of all this, but in principle a messianic community must be an open community. It must also be an *expanding* community. Mission (rightly understood) is essential to the definition of ‘messianic’. Where we have a messiah we must have a messianic mission and a messianic vocation as well. Such a messianic community must be committed to the *other*. The *other* is constitutive of both *self* and *community*. The messianic community is the community that is *for* the *other* as *other*. This is based on God’s very nature as trinity (unity in diversity), and the economy of salvation itself—God creates community with humanity *while always maintaining the otherness of the creature*. This dynamic is often referred to as God’s respect for our “freedom.” The commitment to the *other* is for the sake of the *Other*—that is Christ himself. If Jesus can be understood as “the Man for Others” (Bonhoeffer) then his community must be a community that is committed to the *other* for the sake of the *Other*—who is the *Someone* to come.

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<sup>65</sup>W. Pannenberg has perhaps done more than any other theologian to rethink the problem of time from a through-going messianic perspective.

## Conclusion

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”<sup>66</sup> Dickens could have been speaking about today. With a planet in peril, the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s, ongoing wars, and striking changes in culture, socio-economic demographics, and politics—one might be excused for feeling a little overwhelmed. But it is striking that even “with twilight closing in” there is at the same time a remarkably optimistic sense of possibility in the air. Change is in the air. And while some are afraid, far more are hopeful, yes, even expectant.

How does all this sound to Adventist ears? Are we still that ‘voice of hope’ that we have claimed to be? We began with Hegel’s reminder that the “Owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk.” Now is the time for the church to take stock and “advance” as Froom called for in his day. Now is the time for us to engage in the task of “Re-envisioning Adventism.”

My little contribution to this task, in this paper, has been to call for a “more radically ‘Adventist’ Adventism”—an Adventism that sees itself as nothing more than a movement radically committed to the Coming God, and thus to the good news of Emmanuel.

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<sup>66</sup>Charles Dickens, opening words of his *Tale of Two Cities*.