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# Post-modernism & The Gospel: The Implications of the Writings of Erich Fromm and Paul Tillich For a Relevant Seventh-day Adventism

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## **Post-modernism & The Gospel**

The Implications of the Writings of Erich Fromm and Paul Tillich  
For a Relevant Seventh-day Adventism

Presented by  
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April 18, 2003

Advisor  
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“What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience--and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.”

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**  
***Letters from Prison***

## Table of Contents

Methodology	4
I. History of Adventist Evangelism	5
II. Current Status of Adventist Evangelism	8
III. Anatomy of the Post-modern Mind	14
IV. Towards a New Evangelistic Paradigm	20
V. Erich Fromm: A Diagnosis of the Post-modern Crisis	23
VI. Paul Tillich: Christ as Identity in the Post-modern World	29
VII. Conclusion: How the Church Must Respond	35
Selected Bibliography	40

## **Methodology**

The Seventh-day Adventist church currently faces an evangelistic crisis in the post-modern cultural climate. This paper explores the reasons the church has struggled to maintain an effective witness in the post-modern world, examining the historical development and nature of Adventist evangelism as well as the characteristics of post-modern culture. It is asserted that because the Adventist church's mode of evangelism is rooted in the modern paradigm of the nineteenth century, it does not effectively communicate its message to the post-modern individual. Whereas the modern paradigm placed emphasis on adherence to absolute, rational truth, the post-modern world rejects these notions and is skeptical of those who make such absolute claims regarding "truth."

In examining how the Adventist church may better address the post-modern world, the writings of Erich Fromm and Paul Tillich are presented as examples of discussing spiritual matters according to the constraints of the post-modern paradigm. It is demonstrated that Fromm and Tillich address the post-modern individual in terms that are non-threatening, appealing to the existing spiritual identity of the individual rather than a foreign, absolute standard. By incorporating an existential mode of presenting the gospel, as represented by the writings of Fromm and Tillich, it is argued that the Adventist church may more effectively minister to the post-modern world.

## History of Adventist Evangelism

Since its earliest beginnings as a movement arising from the Second Great Awakening, the Seventh-day Adventist church has remained fundamentally tied to the work of evangelism. In fact, the very identity of the Adventist church is bound with an evangelistic imperative, as the church asserts its purpose in proclaiming the “Three Angels’ Messages” found in Revelation 14. As C. Mervyn Maxwell affirms, “Seventh-day Adventism has been more than a mere religious society. It has been a movement with a message and a sense of mission.”<sup>1</sup> History clearly supports this statement. Aspiring to illuminate the entire world with the claims of God’s eternal Law and the warning of a pre-Advent judgment, the Adventist church had by 1901 established a “world-wide organization which supported 16 colleges and high schools; 27 hospitals, sanitariums and medical schools; 13 publishing houses; and 31 other miscellaneous institutions” to achieve that end.<sup>2</sup> Under the leadership of James and Ellen White, who were unequivocal regarding the necessity of global evangelism, the Adventist church body was organized with the specific objective of spreading the full light of the gospel to every “nation, kindred, tongue and people” (Rev. 14:6).

In order to fully understand the means by which the early Adventist church sought to achieve its evangelistic goals, one needs first to apprehend the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century in which Seventh-day Adventism was born. Emerging from the Enlightenment – a movement originating in Europe that emphasized the primacy of reason and rationally derived truth – the nineteenth century was bustling with rapid changes in both the arts and sciences. People at this time were abandoning long-

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<sup>1</sup> C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It To The World* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1976), 152.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Fowler, *Evangelism 2000* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1994), 10.

held traditions and ideas rooted in the medieval world, opting in favor of new promises being offered by scientific inquiry and reason. A major paradigm shift had taken place: society was no longer bound by the authority of ancient institutions and their traditions, but had rather sworn allegiance to the pursuit of reason and a worldview subject to its laws. The nineteenth century witnessed the explosion of modernity, as devotion to the principles of reason and its role in human progress was spreading with a religious fervor and transforming virtually every aspect of life.

Such a shift in the world at large held repercussions for the Christian world as well. Specifically, the once powerful influence of the Catholic Church had been drastically mitigated in the Enlightenment, while Protestant denominations actively flourished under their emancipation from traditional authority. By this time, the Protestant world had steadily built upon the prior achievements of the Reformation and was firmly committed to a reasonable faith – one that applied the powers of reason to the authority of the Bible in order to deduce spiritual truth. Such being the case, the early Adventist church primarily sought to communicate its message by appealing to these principles. The exposition of the Adventist message in accordance with the axioms of Biblical authority and rational interpretation became a finely honed evangelistic tool during this time, a force against which no Bible-believing proponent of different theological views could easily stand. During this time, many speakers arose that were exceptionally skilled at presenting the Adventist message, often impugning the doctrines of other denominations through public debate with their representatives. This rational approach to Biblical interpretation and explanation, which allowed for the demystification of ancient types and prophetic symbolism, was tremendously effective in

converting minds to the Adventist message. Furthermore, the nineteenth century's emphasis on truth and the ordering of one's life in accordance with it seemed to provide convinced hearers of the Adventist message with all of the required impetus for conversion.

## Current Status of Adventist Evangelism

Today, despite marked differences in societal values and modes of thinking, the Adventist church continues to primarily employ nineteenth century methods of evangelism in seeking to spread its message. One church leader acknowledges that “In fact, our basic approach to evangelism has not changed since the times of S.N. Haskell, E.E. Franke, and William Simpson.”<sup>3</sup> Public meetings that present rational arguments and appeals to Biblical authority remain the primary venue for conveying the Adventist message. However, rather than finding access to a majority of contemporary minds and continuing in the success of its earlier efforts, these methods have met with a limited scope and reduced impact in significant parts of the world.

Perhaps the best way to describe the current trends in Adventist evangelism is to examine the statistics that reveal the areas where it is succeeding, as well as the areas where improvement is necessary. The Adventist church’s *139<sup>th</sup> Annual Statistical Report—2001* provides an overview of evangelistic success and stagnancy by detailing the percentage of total accessions to the church according to division. This data is illustrated in the following tables along with information regarding the average tithe contribution per capita, per year, in order to provide a basic sociological description of each division represented.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Zamora, “The Gospel of the Abundant Life,” *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 129.

<sup>4</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *139<sup>th</sup> Annual Statistical Report—2001* (Silver Spring, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2001), 4, 37.

**Table 1**

<b>Division</b>	<b>Percent of Accessions to the World Church</b>	<b>Tithe Per Capita (US\$)</b>
Africa-Indian Ocean	10.92	5.33
Eastern Africa	19.21	5.36
Inter-American	16.77	58.55
South American	20.45	56.25
Southern Asia	13.51	3.19

**Table 2**

<b>Division</b>	<b>Percent of Accessions to the World Church</b>	<b>Tithe Per Capita (US\$)</b>
North American	3.85	742.27
Euro-Africa	2.57	387.96
Trans-European	0.40	403.11

As the above data indicates, the areas where the Adventist message has elicited the greatest response are also those among the poorest in the church. Table 1 shows that over eighty percent of new members added to the church in 2001 came from divisions comprised of Third World and other developing countries. Conversely, Table 2 demonstrates that the three most affluent divisions of the church – covering North America and Western Europe – combined to account for only seven percent of new conversions in 2001.

The following questions naturally arise: Why is there so much disparity in evangelistic success between countries of affluence and countries only beginning to achieve modernization? Has the Adventist church lost its evangelistic initiative in countries of affluence? The answer to the latter question is both “Yes” and “No.” While the Adventist church has continued year after year to promote evangelism in North

America and Europe with Net '98 and similar campaigns, the church has yet to adjust its methods of evangelism to address the different spiritual needs of individuals living in these cultures. With the increase in affluence, a corresponding shift toward secularism and a post-modern paradigm<sup>5</sup> has occurred in these regions. Furthermore, the secularized, post-modern mindset of many people living in affluent nations is not easily engaged by the rationalist evangelistic methods that the church continues to abide by. Thus, despite the efforts made, success in effecting conversions has been severely limited. As Kenneth Cox succinctly states, "Public evangelism as it is presently conducted does not reach the secular mind."<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, because Adventist evangelism "as we know it today, and the theological understanding in which it is rooted, are... a heritage of... nineteenth-century American evangelical awakening,"<sup>7</sup> Adventist evangelistic methods remain successful in those countries where modernization stands at a level similar to that experienced by the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Essentially, because of its failure to grow along with the prevailing culture in America and Western Europe, Adventist evangelism has had to shift its focus to developing populations to maintain success. However, as globalization continues to expand and assimilate even these cultures, it may be that Adventist evangelistic methods, should they remain static, will

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<sup>5</sup> The terms "secularism" and "post-modernism" may be distinguished in that secularism refers to a worldview irrespective of religious concerns while post-modernism refers to a worldview that rejects modern notions of absolute values and rationalism. Though the term "secular" may be properly used to also describe one who embraces a modern paradigm, in the affluent regions of Western Europe and North America contemporary secularism is primarily expressed by the post-modern paradigm. Thus, for the purposes of this paper secularism will only be used to refer to the post-modern worldview.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Cox, "Evangelistic Problems and Suggestions," *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 79.

<sup>7</sup> Gottfried Oosterwal, "The Process of Secularization," *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 61.

one day be rendered largely obsolete and ineffective in these currently developing areas as well.

As early as twenty years ago the Adventist church recognized its growing problem with reaching the post-modern world. At the request of Neal C. Wilson, then President of the General Conference, the Committee on Secularism was established, which met nine times from 1981 to 1985 to address the concerns of reaching secularized and other non-Christian populations. Publishing a collection of several papers under the title *Meeting the Secular Mind*, the Committee on Secularism was able to clearly identify the difficulties at hand as well as outline several suggestions regarding how to confront them. However, as of 2001, the church acknowledges that no effective inroads have been made into reaching secular people.<sup>8</sup>

One reason for the failure to establish methods of reaching post-modern society with the gospel ironically results from the comparative success of evangelism in developing countries. While baptisms in countries such as Kenya and Papua New Guinea are proclaimed to be taking place in Pentecostal proportions and fulfilling the Gospel Commission of Matthew 28, the populations of urban America and Europe are quietly slipping into further darkness. It seems that as a result of overemphasizing and celebrating the evangelistic success in developing nations, the church has been anesthetized to some extent with regard to the need for developing and implementing new strategies to reach the growing number of post-modern minds.

This problem of neglecting post-modern culture in evangelism is further complicated by the fact that some success *has* been consistently achieved in America among immigrants and other largely uneducated, lower-middle class groups, which

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<sup>8</sup> Russell Burrill, "The unchurched: A rich source for Adventist outreach," *Ministry*, June 2002, 6.

remain in the modern paradigm.<sup>9</sup> Many have confused a measure of success in these particular groups for success in the region at large, while the urban and educated classes remain relatively unaffected. However, As William G. Johnsson writes, “Within many nations we find large populations, people groupings, that Adventism scarcely has touched. That is, geographical penetration by no means is equivalent to cultural penetration.” In other words, taking the gospel to every “tribe, nation, tongue and people” means much more than simply establishing a “bridgehead in a particular continent or nation.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, evangelism to the post-modern world has been hampered by resistance from certain conservative elements within the Adventist church itself. The Adventist faith has confined its identity in many respects to a movement in the nineteenth century, remaining fearful of advancing beyond its pillars of establishment. In so doing, the church has removed itself from meaningful dialogue with the contemporary intellectual world. This attitude is epitomized in journals such as *Our Firm Foundation*, which merely seek to reaffirm the fundamental doctrines of the denomination. However, as one church leader points out, “Greater emphasis on the contemporary relevance of Adventism, on its forward look, and the positive aspects of its inherent optimism and expectation, will be more inviting to the secular mind than a quarrelsome reiteration of the past.”<sup>11</sup> Such emphasis on fidelity to a historical identity is symptomatic of the insecurity the Adventist church faces in the post-modern climate. Reacting against the uncertainties of the post-modern era, many Adventists have taken refuge in the

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<sup>9</sup> Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World*, (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 32-33.

<sup>10</sup> William G. Johnsson, “The Challenge of Secular Thought,” *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Weeks, “Lengthening the Cords, Strengthening the Stakes,” *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 97.

Adventist cultural identity. Furthermore, this insecurity and misperception of post-modernism as a threat to the church's existence has even led some church leaders to assert that the characteristics of post-modern culture are simply manifestations of a reprobate world and should be fought rather than understood and engaged.<sup>12</sup> Yet the truth remains that before the gospel can be revealed as a witness to the entire world as it must, some method of effective gospel presentation must be developed to reach those for whom a rational and authoritative appeal to the Bible closes, rather than opens, doors to the heart.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bryan Ball, "Beware the March of Ideas," *Record (South Pacific)*, 13 December 1997, 2.

## Anatomy of the Post-modern Mind

Before one can begin to develop strategies for reaching the post-modern world with the message of the gospel, it is first important to examine and understand the characteristics of post-modern culture. By tracing the path that has led from the modern to post-modern worldview and noting the different spiritual needs expressed by post-modern people, a foundation is laid from which the church may construct a relevant and coherent means of presenting the gospel to this growing population.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting that the seeds of post-modern culture, which have significantly taken root in society only within the last fifty years, were actually sown at the dawn of modernity in the sixteenth century. With the advent of the Protestant Reformation, a decisive break from the authoritarian structure of the medieval world occurred, heralding the rise of a theretofore sorely neglected entity: the individual man and woman. Casting aside the magisterial claims of the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformers believed they could no longer be compelled to subject both their temporal and eternal destinies to the iron hierarchy of the Middle Ages. The reformers reasoned that man was capable of being a self-determined creature in matters of ultimate concern, relying upon his own interpretation of the Bible and following the dictates of his own conscience. Given the primacy of religion in human affairs during this time, the shift toward asserting the rights of the individual in spiritual matters revolutionized every other aspect of life as well. Having escaped from the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church in religious and civil affairs, people living in the age following the Protestant Reformation were free to pursue vast new fields of science and philosophy. The result

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<sup>13</sup> The following analysis is corroborated and explained in much greater detail by Erich Fromm in his work *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Owl Books, 1994), 23-102.

was an explosion of growth and progress giving rise to modern industry and liberal democracy. Achievements in communication, medicine and other material comforts gave the modern period an air of optimism that held an intoxicating influence, for the possibilities of human achievement seemed limitless.

Such emphasis on individual liberty, with its enormous implications for man and society, is also seen to be a fundamental component of post-modern thought and culture. However, in the developed nations of North America and Europe where mankind has had the greatest opportunity to enjoy and assess the fruits of individual liberty and modern progress, the optimism of the modern period has rather been succeeded by ennui and despair. While the assertion of individual rights brought about a necessary and positive change from the totalitarian system dominating the Middle Ages, their heavy emphasis in Western culture has culminated in the fragmentation of society and an erosion of absolutes. The premium placed on the individual in the post-modern world has often come at the expense of social unity on many levels, such that mankind now struggles to ascertain any external, objective basis for his values or identity. Thus, the stifling of human development within the medieval prison of a single worldview has been replaced by its bewilderment in the post-modern labyrinth of infinite worldviews.

Even belief in the power of reason as an absolute value, which weaned man away from a religious and mystical interpretation of the universe and sustained him in his early modern autonomy, has now been abandoned in the post-modern world. Although reason initially liberated man from tradition and superstition, reason has ultimately enslaved man by the implications of modern science which reduce him to a

helpless cog in the cosmos. Francis Schaeffer, who has dealt extensively with the issue of man's loss of absolutes and his abandonment of reason, speaks thus regarding the situation: "humanistic reason affirms that there is only the cosmic machine, which encompasses everything, including people. To those who hold this view everything people are or do is explained by some form of determinism, some type of behaviorism, some kind of reductionism."<sup>14</sup> He further illustrates the irony of man's pursuit of reason by stating "rather than becoming great, he has found himself ending up as only a collection of molecules—and nothing more."<sup>15</sup> Finally, Schaeffer summarizes man's condition upon reaching these limits of reason: "At this point the older rationalistic thinkers (with their optimistic hope of maintaining unity between the world of reason and that of meaning and values) were left behind. This is the mark of modern<sup>16</sup> man."<sup>17</sup> With the death of reason as the last of the absolutes, post-modern man is left to stand solely upon the shifting ground of his subjective experience while attempting to wield the heavy responsibility of his individual autonomy.

As a result of the abandonment of absolutes and rationalism by the post-modern world, certain key characteristics have developed in post-modern culture that the Adventist church would do well to consider. By understanding and responding to these essential characteristics, the church may engage those in the post-modern world in a much more effective manner, being better able to diagnose the problems faced by post-modern society and to present the gospel as a relevant solution to post-modern needs. As Ellen White recognized over a hundred years ago that "Lessons must be given to

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976), 164.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Schaeffer appears to refer more precisely to *post-modern* man in this passage.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

humanity in the language of humanity,"<sup>18</sup> the church today must also recognize that "The proclamation of the gospel must always be carried out in the context of a careful study of the prevailing culture."<sup>19</sup>

The first of these essential characteristics of post-modern culture may be summed up in the term *relativity*. Relativity is a direct consequence of post-modern society's loss of absolute values. Rather than accepting a set of universals that are valid for all people at all times, post-modern people hold that truth is contingent upon circumstances, social norms, or even personal taste. In his book *A Reasonable Faith*, Anthony Campolo describes post-modern relativity with respect to morality in these words: "Normative systems vary from society to society, and there is no single system that can be designated as absolutely binding for all people at all times... There are no longer divinely ordained morals, only socially relative mores. For secular man, the days of absolutes about right and wrong are now over. All things are now relative."<sup>20</sup> An important implication of relativity is that post-modern individuals are wary of groups, such as the Adventist church, who make absolute claims to truth, particularly if such claims are presented in a manner perceived as condemning.

A second characteristic of post-modern society is one that, like relativity, also has its roots in the absence of absolutes. With the loss of faith in abstracted absolutes, the post-modern world has become increasingly focused on the more tangible elements of reality, choosing to invest faith in material human progress. Thus, the attitude of *materialism* has become an epidemic in the post-modern world. This attitude has been

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<sup>18</sup> Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 19xx), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Paulien, "The Gospel in a Secular World," *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith: Responding to Secularism* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 45.

described as "Confidence in the achievements of science and technology...wonder drugs, men on the moon, the end of smallpox, increase in life expectancy, automobiles, telephones, air conditioners, computers. The secular man or woman is impressed by them and places trust in such tangible results rather than in the invisible world of which religion speaks."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the church to recognize, a key characteristic of post-modern society is *alienation*. Post-modern individuals in general tend to feel alienated and isolated from the fragmented world around them. Anyone observing the social dynamics of a crowded New York City subway car will understand the intense feeling of separation among such people, even though they are physically pressed together. With the increasing disintegration of the family unit as well as the geographic and cultural community, the post-modern individual is left without an affirmation of his or her identity or sense of belonging in the surrounding environment. A terrible sense of loneliness, manifesting itself in psychologically destructive appetites for sexual intimacy and drug abuse, afflicts many individuals in the post-modern climate. In his work geared toward understanding and reaching the secular mind, George Hunter describes the current alienation of man as residing on multiple levels. He writes

Today, it is possible to describe many secular people in terms of multiple alienations. Many people are alienated from nature, as evidenced by sport killing, strip mining, endangered species, and the mounting ecological crisis. Many people are alienated from their neighbors, as evidenced by the anonymity of high-rise apartment dwellers and people's abuse of each other in economic transactions. Many people are alienated from the political and economic systems upon which their lives depend, as evidenced by the breakdown of lifetime job security and the bumper sticker reading "Don't vote for anybody, it only encourages them!" Many people are alienated from their vocations, as evidenced by their expressed

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<sup>21</sup> William G. Johnsson, "The Challenge of Secular Thought," *Meeting the Secular Mind*, 16.

lack of meaning in their life work and their obsession with leisure pursuits.<sup>22</sup>

Hunter emphasizes the seriousness of mankind's alienation by adding, "some medical professionals claim that loneliness is the number one killer in America."<sup>23</sup> Overall, it is clear the problem of alienation is a fundamental and serious issue faced by post-modern society that, among others, the church cannot afford to ignore in its ministry to the world.

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<sup>22</sup> George G. Hunter, III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 49-50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Towards a New Evangelistic Paradigm**

In developing new strategies toward evangelism in the post-modern paradigm, it is valuable to examine the writings of individuals who have already established effective means of addressing the spiritual component of post-modern humanity. By sifting through the ideas of such individuals, important methods of communicating the Adventist message to the post-modern world may be discovered and synthesized. However, the scope and limitation of these contributions to a relevant Adventist evangelism should first be properly understood.

In the first place, most writings of those concerned with post-modern spirituality have largely been set forth in intellectual terms. While Adventist evangelists have typically rejected such expressions of faith as adulterations of Christianity's essential message, it is asserted that a valid place for them indeed exists. Expounding the gospel in philosophical, rather than overtly religious, language can bypass the skeptical and defensive attitudes of many post-moderns with regard to organized religion. Furthermore, though it is entirely agreed that evangelism through a living demonstration of its principles can hardly be improved upon in terms of communicative or doctrinal integrity, an intellectual aspect of presenting the faith is also warranted by the Bible<sup>24</sup> and is enhanced by the contributions of enlightened intellectuals. Despite the fear of an intellectual approach to faith, one church leader suggests that

“Every generation must find its own renewed vision, and this is the task of the intellectual. Moreover, only the intellectual can really bridge the gap between ideologies, understanding the appeal of Eastern mysticism or positivist philosophy and framing a paradigm within the Christian and

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Isaiah 44 where the prophet reasons with Israel concerning the nature of idolatry.

Adventist context that will appeal to the secular person and bring meaning to contemporary experience.<sup>25</sup>

Although a philosophical grasp of truth without an accompanying application to the heart is ultimately of no effect, the valuable evangelistic purpose of breaking hardened ground – gaining access to an individual by accosting him or her in ways not perceived as authoritarian and threatening – may be accomplished with such an approach, preparing hearts to receive the full seed of the gospel message. Finally, as another church leader suggests, because “philosophy and science underlie all categories of secularists,” presenting the gospel in an intellectual format and “concentrating our efforts on educated secularists...will have the greatest effect, as they are much more influential in our society.”<sup>26</sup> As all changes in society generally begin at its upper echelons and gradually filter down to the lower levels, addressing spirituality in terms appreciated by the upper classes opens an effective front for post-modern evangelism. Overall, it cannot be denied that an intellectual representation of the faith, though not completely effective by itself in producing conversion, contains much merit for post-modern evangelism.

Given these qualifications, the writings of two particular individuals stand out with regard to addressing spiritual issues in the post-modern world. Writing during the twentieth century with the emergence of post-modern culture, Erich Fromm and Paul Tillich have each made substantial contributions toward articulating and resolving the spiritual issues of contemporary humanity. Exposing the detrimental effects of

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<sup>25</sup> Alvin L. Kwiram, “The Modern Intellectual,” *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 74.

<sup>26</sup> Hector Hammerly, “A Strategy for Public Evangelism,” *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 107.

modernity's overemphasis on science and materialism, Fromm and Tillich highlight the need for man to confront his affliction <sup>(from)</sup> with these new modes of idolatry and the corresponding alienation from himself and his environment. Fromm and Tillich also help to satisfy the needs of an effective post-modern evangelism in that they both speak from an existential perspective, arguing according to the fundamental characteristics and needs of humanity without appealing to abstract or external absolutes. Furthermore, while both Fromm and Tillich hold non-traditional views, each builds and references his ideas within the framework of the Judeo-Christian ethic – Fromm as a Jew and Tillich as a Christian – thereby drawing direct lines of correlation between the existential problems of humanity and the existential solutions revealed in the Bible. While a departure from traditional Adventist views may give rise to apprehension in some, it should be remembered that “Gentiles” have often made positive contributions and held valid insight with regard to the faith, not being exempt from the Spirit of Divine inspiration.<sup>27</sup> After all, it was not Jews who were present to worship at the birth of Christ, but rather wise men from the East. As Howard Weeks comments, “A creative, communicative and contemporary approach to the knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity should open many productive pathways by which we may both reach and *be reached* by other mortals who have been spiritually awakened” (italics supplied).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Consider these statements by Ellen White: “Outside of the Jewish nation there were men who foretold the appearance of a divine instructor. These men were seeking for truth and to them the Spirit of Inspiration was imparted...Among those whom the Jews styled heathen were men who had a better understanding of the scripture prophecies concerning the Messiah than had the teachers in Israel.” *Desire of Ages*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Weeks, “Lengthening the Cords, Strengthening the Stakes,” *Meeting the Secular Mind*, 97-98.

## **Erich Fromm: A Diagnosis of the Post-modern Crisis**

As a psychologist affiliated with the Institute for Social Research, also known as the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm was immensely concerned with the problems facing mankind in the wake of modernity. In his writings, Fromm seeks to illuminate the nature of these problems, citing them as manifestations of the same idolatry condemned in the Old Testament. Fromm's exposition of the materialistic and alienated condition of humanity in light of Biblical idolatry presents key insights for an attempt at post-modern evangelism. This is because Fromm does not present his message in terms that are merely condemning from an authoritarian perspective (i.e. disobedience to an absolute standard or entity), but rather from a humanistic perspective. He demonstrates that idolatry is not so much an affront to God that engenders guilt and condemnation, but that idolatry is a destructive betrayal of man's essential being. This approach effectively removes the elements of preemptive judgment and guilt that have served as barriers to evangelism in the post-modern world. The church must remember that without a prior revelation of God's grace, the preaching of judgment has no basis.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, because grace can only be understood by the measure of the debt forgiven and the depths from which humanity has been redeemed, Fromm's depiction of man's fallen state in idolatry is well warranted. Thus, by illustrating the destructive nature of idolatry – the first sin enumerated in the law and a fundamental component of all sin – Fromm reveals man's need of salvation in the positive terms of healing and restoration rather than the negative terms of mere release from divine reprisal. Consider the marked contrast displayed in the following passages regarding idolatry. The first is taken from the Adventist evangelistic publication *Signs of the Times*:

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. John 3:17-19; Hebrews 10:26-31

What about me? Am I trusting in my diploma, my IRAs, my CDs, and my job security more than in God? Have I forgotten that it is He who not only holds my molecules together but also gives me the power to produce wealth (see Colossians 1:17; Deuteronomy 8:18)?

Today's idols are often obsessions—sex, narcotics, money, food, career, or even nonbiblical religious practices. If I discover such imbalances in my life, I need to talk to God: "Lord, I recognize that I'm not living according to Your plan. Give me courage to search my Bible for Your wise and wonderful blueprint for my life. And give me strength to follow that plan."<sup>30</sup>

Now observe the different way that Fromm explicates idolatry in this passage from *The Sane Society*:

If man is created in the likeness of God, he is created as the bearer of infinite qualities. In idolatry man bows down and submits to the projection of one partial quality in himself. He becomes a thing, his neighbor becomes a thing, just as his gods are things. "The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths. They that make them are like them; so is everyone that trusts in them" (Psalm 135).<sup>31</sup>

And again in this passage taken from Fromm's work *On Being Human*:

Idolatry is not the worship of certain gods instead of others, or of one god instead of many. It is a human attitude, that of the reification of all that is alive. It is a man's submission to *things*, his self-negation as a living, open, ego-transcending being. Idols are gods that do not liberate; in worshipping idols, man makes himself a prisoner and renounces liberation. Idols are gods that do not live; in worshipping idols, man himself is deadened.

The modern concept of alienation expresses the same idea as the traditional concept of idolatry. The alienated man bows down to the work of his own hands and to the circumstances of his own doing. Things and circumstances become his masters, they stand above and against him while he loses the experience of himself as the creative bearer of life. He becomes alienated from himself, from his work, and from his fellow man.

Modern man believes that the sacrificing of children to Moloch was a repugnant manifestation of an idolatric past. He would refuse to worship Moloch, or Mars, or Venus and he does not notice that he worships the same idols, only under different names.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Maylan Schurch, "The Chickens of Babylon," *Signs of the Times*, May 1993, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, (New York: Owl Books, 1990), 122.

<sup>32</sup> Erich Fromm, *On Being Human*, (New York: Continuum, 1999), 97-98.

The difference represented in these two approaches to confronting an audience with idolatry is significant. The author of the passage printed in the *Signs of the Times*, while correctly upholding Biblical standards regarding idolatry and correctly pointing out contemporary idols, does not bother to explain the detrimental character of idolatry. He simply points to an absolute standard and appeals to his audience to conform to that standard, which is presented as something outside or alien to his nature. While this may have some effect for one in whom Biblical authority demands unquestioning submission, this approach is not only ineffective, but also wholly irrelevant to the post-modern mind. On the other hand, Fromm zeroes in on the situation faced by humanity by correlating idolatry with the common experience of existential alienation. Fromm's description of the destructive character of idolatry is such that he does not even need to appeal to divine authority; an impetus for change arises simply from Fromm's description of man as alienated from himself.

Another aspect of Fromm's writing that is relevant for the church to consider with regard to post-modern evangelism is his portrayal of the nature of love. Whereas the method of the Adventist church in presenting the commandment to love is rooted in the modern paradigm of obedience to a divine command, Fromm's treatment of the subject reveals the necessity of love as a means of overcoming man's existential estrangement from himself and the world around him. Again, by establishing an imperative to love based upon the nature of human experience rather than an appeal to absolute authority, Fromm successfully engages the post-modern mind in spiritual affairs. The following passages are taken from his work entitled *The Art of Loving*. In the first passage he

outlines the existential isolation endured by man, and in the second he prescribes love as a remedy for overcoming this intense isolation.

Man is gifted with reason; he is *life being aware of itself*; he has awareness of himself, of his fellow man, of his past, and of the possibilities of his future. This awareness of himself as a separate entity, the awareness of his own short life span, of the fact that without his will he is born and against his will he dies, that he will die before those whom he loves, or they before him, the awareness of his aloneness and separateness, of his helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his separate disunited existence an unbearable prison. He would become insane could he not liberate himself from this prison and reach out, unite himself in some form or other with men, with the world outside.<sup>33</sup>

... mature love is *union under the condition of preserving one's integrity*, one's individuality. *Love is an active power in man*; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.<sup>34</sup>

Here Fromm not only addresses the existential need for love in man, but is also sensitive to the post-modern emphasis on individuality.

Finally, Fromm also presents an effective method of communicating even distinct Adventist truths to the post-modern world in his discussion of the Sabbath. Traditionally, the Sabbath has been presented in Adventist evangelism by first establishing the binding claims of the Ten Commandments and then rationally demonstrating that the Fourth Commandment means the seventh-day Sabbath, or Saturday. Thus, an injunction to keep the Sabbath holy is developed from both an appeal to absolute authority and a rational demonstration of truth, neither of which are acceptable to a post-modern audience. In his book *The Almost Forgotten Day*, Mark

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<sup>33</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Bantam Books, 1956), 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

Finley typifies this common Adventist approach to presenting the claims of the Sabbath.<sup>35</sup> Though Finley does establish existential reasons for Sabbath-keeping in nine pages of a chapter entitled "The Surprising Answer to Tension," he proceeds to devote the entirety of the remaining 131 pages to systematically examining the historical, linguistic, astronomical and Biblical evidence to support that the seventh day remains the Bible Sabbath. Finley concludes his work, not by describing the meaning of the Sabbath for mankind, but by debunking his readers' objections and exhorting them to render allegiance to the Bible Sabbath.

Standing in contrast to Finley's work – which admittedly has its place in certain segments of evangelism – is Fromm's treatment of the subject. Rather than presenting a rational appeal to the truth of the seventh-day Sabbath, Fromm focuses exclusively on the existential meaning of the Sabbath for man, greatly exceeding Finley's work in terms of motivating a post-modern audience to keep the Sabbath. He writes in his book *To Have or To Be?*

In order to understand this role [of the Sabbath] we must penetrate to the core of the Shabbat institution. It is not rest *per se*, in the sense of not making an effort, physically or mentally. It is rest in the sense of the re-establishment of complete harmony between human beings and between them and nature. Nothing must be destroyed and nothing be built: the Shabbat is a day of truce in the human battle with the world... On the Shabbat one lives as if one *has* nothing, pursuing no aim except *being*, that is, expressing one's essential powers: praying, studying, eating, drinking, singing, making love.<sup>36</sup>

*Judeo-Christian*

Overall, Fromm's presentation of Christian ideas – even Adventist ideas – reveals how truth can be communicated without having to rationally argue the meaning of an absolute decree. Illustrating the nature of sin and the necessity to love in a non-

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Finley, *The Almost Forgotten Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: AIM)

<sup>36</sup> Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 39-40.

judgmental manner as well as presenting the Sabbath as a rest for man rather than a service to God reflect great insight in dealing with the post-modern psyche. Although one may not fully agree with Fromm's understanding of theology, his mode of communication stands out as an important step forward for post-modern evangelism.

## Paul Tillich: Christ as Identity in the Post-modern World

A twentieth century German-American theologian, Paul Tillich described the Christian experience as one of victory over the estrangement that mankind faces in post-modernity. Tillich makes important contributions to evangelism in the post-modern paradigm for several reasons. First of all, Tillich understands the need for religious meaning to be communicated in culturally relevant terms. He argues that there exists no absolute or static religious language that was divinely appointed for the transmission of the gospel to the world. Secondly, Tillich prescribes the heart of the Christian message – righteousness by faith – as a direct answer to the needs of post-modern society. As a result of the relativity and individualism of the post-modern world, a solid basis for values and identity is lacking. However, Tillich demonstrates that the transcendent, eternal God is able to fill the void in man's values and supply his identity through an intimately personal revelation of Himself in an individual's life.

Tillich's understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion and culture is one of his most important contributions to the field of theology, containing valid implications for Adventist evangelism as well. In his work *Theology of Culture*, Tillich explains that "The form of religion is culture. This is especially obvious in the language used by religion. Every language, including that of the Bible, is the result of innumerable acts of cultural creativity."<sup>37</sup> As a result of this understanding, Tillich argues that the role of the church is to

...answer the question implied in man's very existence, the question of the meaning of this existence. One of the ways in which the Church does this is evangelism. The principle of evangelism must be to show to the people outside the Church that the symbols in which the life of the Church

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 47.

expresses itself are answers to the questions implied in their very existence as human beings.<sup>38</sup>

Tillich maintains that the church cannot address the world in absolute terms because all terms are culturally relative. Therefore, the church must undertake evangelism, not in the sense of producing conformity to a cultural or doctrinal standard as the Adventist church has generally done, but rather to answer the most fundamental problems facing man in whatever terms they may be expressed. The symbols of Christianity must be translated into terms understandable and existentially meaningful to the culture in which they are presented. In presenting the gospel to the post-modern world

They must feel that Christianity is not a set of doctrinal or ritual or moral laws, but is rather the good news of the conquest of the law by the appearance of a new healing reality. They must feel that the Christian symbols are not absurdities, unacceptable for the questioning mind of our period, but that they point to that which alone is of ultimate concern, the ground and meaning of our existence and of existence generally.<sup>39</sup>

In this respect, Tillich is in full agreement with Paul's assertion that "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Gal. 6:15). In other words, the power of Christ to effect a new mode of being in the life of the believer must necessarily subsume conformity to any set of cultural standards, which are but the relative expressions of a particular moment in history. As such, the Adventist church must not focus primarily on propagating its doctrines and culture, which is the current focus of much of its evangelism, but rather on the power of God to provide a meaningful existence.

One should not confuse Tillich's emphasis on the priority of meaningful existence over cultural norms as abolishing all absolute standards in Christianity. Quite contrary

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 50.

to this, Tillich asserts that one can find his or her true being only in the character of Christ as revealed through the transforming power of His Word.<sup>40</sup> What is superfluous is the form or medium through which the Divine Being is expressed. This principle is clearly demonstrated throughout scripture as God was able to reveal Himself through such diverse means as the cultic rituals of the ancient Near East, through the life of a Palestinian carpenter, and through the Stoic philosophical concept of the Logos.

Another aspect of Tillich's writing that is especially relevant for Adventist evangelism is his portrayal of the nature of sin. Like Fromm, Tillich presents the concept of sin through a paradigm of healing rather than that of judgment. The following passage makes clear Tillich's views on the nature of sin in man:

The first step to an understanding of the Christian message that is called "good news" is to dispel the image of sin that implies a catalogue of sins....

Those, however, who have experienced in their hearts that sin is more than the trespassing of a list of rules know that all sins are manifestations of Sin, of the power of estrangement and inner conflict. Sin dwells in us, it controls us, and makes us do what we don't want to do. It produces a split in us that makes us lose identity with ourselves.<sup>41</sup>

Such a discussion of sin as a power that produces separation in man is not wholly unknown in Adventism. Morris Venden expounds this idea well in many of his writings. However, rather than simply focusing on sin as the condition of separation between man and God as Venden does, Tillich carries this concept further by describing sin as the very power of alienation itself. In this sense, sin carries over to every aspect of man's life, not simply his relationship to God. Thus, a connection is made between the

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), 31-33.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 52-53.

disease of sin and the alienation experienced in the life of a post-modern individual for whom a relationship with God may not be relevant at the moment.

Finally, the pinnacle of Tillich's thought as far as relevant Adventist evangelism is concerned is found in his treatment of the nature of salvation. Like Fromm, Tillich first exposes the nature of sin as a transgression against the fundamental character of man. Citing the schizophrenic experience related by Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans, Tillich describes sin as producing "a split in us that makes us lose identity with ourselves."<sup>42</sup> He asserts that sin produces such a split only because it is a negation or denial of mankind's primary identity as a holy creation of God. Man would feel no cognitive dissonance in sin if he had no enmity or inherent goodness in his nature with which to contrast it.

Tillich develops this thought by identifying the inner essence of man with divinity. He states, "Sin is our act of turning away from participation in the divine Ground from which we come and to which we go." The idea of man deriving his existence and identity from God is clearly taught in the Bible. Paul states in his epistle to the Colossians that Christ "is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). As such, Christ is the ground or basis of all existence, the Creator and Sustainer of life who reveals the true essence of humanity as well as divinity.

Upon this foundational understanding of the nature of sin as a betrayal of one's true identity which is founded in God, Tillich proceeds to develop the Biblical theme of righteousness by faith, or salvation, in a manner profoundly relevant for individuals living in the post-modern world. Tillich presents the concept of salvation, not as a release from divine punishment, but as the identification by faith of one's being with that of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 53.

Christ. First, however, Tillich outlines the process of attaining salvation by striving to meet the claims of the law, an effort implied by current methods of Adventist evangelism that press for conformity to an external, absolute standard. He writes regarding Paul's description of the power of sin in Romans 7,

It is certainly not broken by ourselves. The attempt to break the power of sin by the power of good will has been described by Paul as the attempt to fulfill the law.... The result of this attempt is failure, guilt and despair. The law, with its commands and prohibitions, despite its function in revealing and restricting evil, provokes resistance against itself.<sup>43</sup>

By attempting to meet the standard of righteousness when that righteousness is presented as something foreign or external to the nature of man, the result can only be the "failure, guilt and despair" that Tillich speaks of. However, Tillich presents a radical way of viewing salvation by what he terms participation in the New Being. Rather than viewing Christ and His righteousness as something to be striven toward – something currently external to man, by appropriating Christ's being and righteousness in faith as one's own *present identity* the power of the gospel is revealed in man. Tillich writes,

But in order to be the bearers of saving power, we must be saved ourselves; the wall separating us from eternal life must be broken through. And here is one thing which strengthens the wall and keeps us sick and enslaved. It is our estrangement and guilt which are the impediments which keep us from reaching eternal life here and now. The judgment against us which we confirm in our conscience is the sickness unto death, the despair of life, from which we must be healed in order to say yes to life.... And if we call Jesus, the Christ, our saviour, then we mean that in him we see the power that heals us by accepting us and which liberates us by showing us in his being a new being—a being in which there is reconciliation with ourselves, with our world, and with the divine Ground of our world and ourselves.<sup>44</sup>

Tillich explains that by releasing our identity as that of alienated sinners and embracing our identity as participants in the New Being – as members of Christ regardless of our

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 120.

feelings – salvation is attained. This is especially important for evangelism in the post-modern world because such an approach transcends the need for appealing to an external, absolute authority. Rather than confronting a post-modern audience with their failure to conform to the divine standard of righteousness, one may confront them with their failure to fully be *themselves*, to fully be human. Because humanity has been created in the image of God, the true identity of each individual bears the likeness of Christ. The church must not confirm people in their identity as sinners, but exhort them to live out their real identity as sons of God, removing the wall of separation implied in the nature of its current methods. Tillich writes,

This is the way we should speak to all those outside the Christian realm, whether they are religious or secular. And we should not be too worried about the Christian religion, about the state of the Churches, about membership and doctrines, about institutions and ministers, about sermons and sacraments. This is circumcision; and the lack of it, the secularization which today is spreading all over the world is uncircumcision. Both are nothing, of no importance, if the ultimate question is asked, the question of a New Reality.<sup>45</sup>

As Tillich states that “The message of Christianity is not Christianity, but a New Reality,”<sup>46</sup> the Adventist church would do well to remember that its message is not Adventism, but that of an abundant life realized through one's identification with Jesus Christ.

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

## Conclusion: How the Church Must Respond

Given the complexity of teaching “Truth” to a society with no regard for absolutes, presenting the hope of an eternal and yet intangible heaven to a culture consumed by materialism, and pressing the need to be “separate from the world” to a generation already alienated to the point of despair, it is no wonder that some prominent Adventists have seen evangelism in the post-modern world as posing insuperable difficulties. These difficulties have led some leaders in evangelism to dismiss outreach to post-modern culture as futile and to the belief that a “post-modern gospel” compromises the essential message of the Adventist church. In this respect, by requiring potential converts to first adopt its particular cultural milieu before they are able to receive the Adventist message, the church has become an unnecessarily insular body. As Brian McLaren writes, “We can hardly conceive of a postmodern being able to become a Christian without becoming modern first; similarly, we can hardly conceive that our way of seeing Christianity is not the only way, but rather the modern way.”<sup>47</sup> However, unless the church is willing to consider post-modern society as already beyond the reach of Christ’s love and thus already eternally condemned, something must be done to present the gospel in terms accessible to post-modern society. If the Adventist church is to remain faithful to its historical identity as an evangelistic movement, it must shift its focus from merely preserving the forms of that identity toward realizing the goals of that identity. Specifically, the Adventist church must contextualize its message for the post-modern mind.

Some have argued that Paul’s experience at Athens with presenting Christ to the Greeks in terms of their own philosophy (Acts 17:16-34) and his subsequent statement

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<sup>47</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 168.

to the Corinthians regarding the futility of human wisdom and his resolve to know nothing among them except "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-5) reveal a Biblical injunction to refrain from presenting the gospel in worldly terms.<sup>48</sup> However, this argument is fundamentally unsound. In the first place, Paul in fact achieved success in Athens as evidenced by the conversion of, among others, Dionysius and Damaris (Acts 17:34). Secondly, Paul later states in the first epistle to the Corinthians that in order to effectively preach the gospel, he became a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles; he had become "all things to all men so that by all possible means" some might be saved (1 Cor. 9:19-23). While it is true that nothing can remove the offense of the cross or make the humility required for salvation more palatable to human pride, effectively *communicating the meaning* of the cross and its implications for humanity remains *sine qua non* with respect to evangelism. The Biblical evidence to support this necessity is considerable, notwithstanding numerous statements by Ellen White regarding the importance of presenting present truth in present terms.<sup>49</sup> One statement in particular made by White to this effect is that "The Creator of all ideas may impress different minds with the same thought, but each may express it in a different way, yet without contradiction. Each dwells on particular points which his constitution and education have fitted him to appreciate."<sup>50</sup> Thus, there is no problem with varying the method of evangelism according to the cultural parameters required by a particular audience, including those of post-modernism, as long as it clearly portrays the gospel. The very Incarnation of Christ as well as the nature of Biblical inspiration equally attest to the necessity of meeting fallen humanity under the conditions in which it resides and

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<sup>48</sup> William Johnsson, "The Challenge of Secular Thought," *Meeting the Secular Mind*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Gottfried Oosterwall, "The Process of Secularization" *Meeting the Secular Mind*, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Ellen White, *Selected Messages, Vol. 1* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1958), 22.

it is clear that today, particularly in America and Europe, fallen humanity exists primarily in a post-modern paradigm not currently reached by the Adventist church's prevalent mode of evangelism. Furthermore, the church's tendency to interpret and propagate the truth of Scripture solely within the confines of a nineteenth century, modern paradigm ultimately represents nothing less than sanctified narcissism, similar to that expressed by the Judaizers of the early Christian church and equally as threatening to the Gentile world.

Given the post-modern characteristics of relativity, materialism and alienation, the question that must be answered at this point is "What medium is most effective for presenting the gospel to the post-modern world?" It must be strongly affirmed that the most effective method will always be a living demonstration of the love of Christ, manifesting itself in service and good deeds toward others. Francis of Assisi had this in mind when he stated, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary." However, it should also be understood that at some point in evangelism words must be present to illuminate such actions that reveal the gospel. At this point, the question becomes "Which context and what kind of language will most effectively convey the meaning of the gospel to the post-modern world?" The answer must include a language that references the common experience of all people, thereby transcending relative cultural norms; one that diagnoses sin in terms that illuminate the self-destructive nature of one's actions rather than simply condemn the individual; and finally, one that connects the isolated world of the post-modern individual with the living God, using words with more concrete meaning than that of a nebulous mysticism. An effective paradigm of communication to the post-modern world must employ language

connecting the message of the gospel to the individual's life using terms with an experiential reference point. Therefore, this paradigm for communicating the gospel is necessarily an *existential* one, represented by the writings of Erich Fromm and Paul Tillich.

Consider first the problem inherent in the traditional language used by most preachers in contemporary Christianity. Statements such as "God loves the world," or "God has a plan for your life," have no specific point of reference in a non-Christian individual's subjective experience. Because of the lack of absolute standards – for only subjective ones exist in the post-modern world – they have no basis from which to be evaluated. Therefore, they become mere tautological assertions about the world that are ultimately meaningless. Richard Rice writes concerning the problem of communicating theistic ideas to the post-modern world, "If the contemporary view leaves man utterly on his own in a reality limited to what his senses perceive, then it is not hard to see why the idea of God seems irrelevant, and language about God so out of touch with our experience as to be incomprehensible."<sup>51</sup> Rice agrees that the challenge of presenting the gospel to the post-modern world "can be effectively met only by appealing to common human experience and by demonstrating that God-language illuminates a dimension of reality as every human being encounters it."<sup>52</sup>

As a pastor in Manhattan reiterates, "For postmoderns, there is no such thing as an abstract truth. Truth does not exist apart from a person or a community."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, by presenting the gospel in terms that are not dependent on abstract

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Rice, "Does God-Talk Make Sense Today? Facing the Secular Challenge," *Spectrum*, 1976, 42.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>53</sup> Samir Selmanovic, "Pastoring on the postmodern frontline," *Ministry*, September 2001, 19.

propositions and rational proofs, but rather based upon the common experiences of mankind, an existential gospel cuts through the barriers imposed by the fragmentation of value, the disintegration of absolutes, and a perceived separation from God. This is not a new approach. When Christ spoke in parables to the crowds, utilizing the common experiences of Palestinian life, he demonstrated this same method of presenting truth. Thus, an existential gospel is not a dangerous innovation, but rather a return to the mode of evangelism employed by Christ Himself. Such an existential gospel has the power to make God especially "real" for post-modern individuals by connecting His presence with the common, concrete experiences of life. Whereas until now the Adventist church has largely "given our eschatological teachings the priority [and] placed the existential ones at the end of a series of sermons like the last pearls on a string,"<sup>54</sup> the time has come for the essential power of the gospel to supplant the idols of Adventist culture and doctrine. In this sense, just as Ellen White pointed out that Hellenization was instrumental in preparing the way for the first advent of Christ – even attributing divine inspiration to some of its philosophers,<sup>55</sup> it may be that post-modernism paves the way for Christ's second advent.<sup>56</sup> By forcing the church to craft its message in terms that address the most fundamental elements of humanness, post-modernism may very well serve as a catalyst for the completion of the atonement, when all barriers between God and man – including those posed by cultural and rational encapsulations of the Divine being – are forever abolished.

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Zamora, "The Gospel of the Abundant Life," *Meeting the Secular Mind*, 131.

<sup>55</sup> Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Jon Paulien, "The Gospel in a Secular World," *Meeting the Secular Mind*, 26.

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**Southern Scholars Honors Program  
Senior Project**

Name Scot Ausborn

Date 1/16

Major Theology



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A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 23 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above Senior Project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

This project ~~is~~ will examine the writings of the humanistic psychologist Erich Fromm, seeking to find parallels between the concepts he expands and those presented in the Bible. <sup>Evangelistic</sup> Crossover to a secular audience is the motivating factor.

Signature of faculty advisor [Signature] Expected date of completion 4/03

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This project has been completed as planned (date) 4-18-2003

This is an "A" project yes This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit yes (3)

Advisor's Final Signature [Signature]

Chair, Honors Committee \_\_\_\_\_ Date Approved \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Advisor, please write your final evaluation of the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this A "quality work."

ADVISOR'S COMMENTS  
on the Southern Scholars Project  
"Post-modernism and the Gospel"  
by Scot Ausborn

The topic chosen for this paper is, like many Honors projects which I have read in the past, a very large issue, one which might very well serve as the subject of a graduate thesis or dissertation. The writer attempts to describe traditional Seventh-day Adventist approaches to evangelism, to identify and diagnose the problems which these traditional approaches have faced in recent decades in their encounter with certain socio-economic groups (especially in North America and western Europe), to tie these problems to the post-modern world views current among the groups in question, and to offer tentative proposals for remedies, based on the suggestions of two spiritual thinkers whose writings analyze the post-modern mindset. Given the space constraints of this project (fewer than 40 typed pages), it is my judgment that the writer has done an admirably good job, though at almost every stage I felt that more was needed.

The treatment of Adventist evangelism (both in history and in the current era) was necessarily brief and also somewhat stereotypical. There has certainly been more variety in Adventist evangelistic approaches than this paper indicates. However if it is kept in mind that it is indeed a stereotype, it is a quite useful and trustworthy caricature. Similarly, the description of post-modernism is both brief and stereotypical, but not unfair. The writer has limited his analysis of the writings of Fromm and Tillich to those portions of their works which focus on their theological anthropology. Again, the treatment is short but fair.

The author's concluding chapter contains only the barest of suggestions for the

resolution of the problems which he has identified. But again, these recommendations go directly to the center of the issue. Essentially, he argues for a presentation of the Christian (and Adventist) message which appeals less to abstract truth and more to the shared experience of humanness. I find myself wishing for more practicality in this section, but realize that space limits make this impossible.

I have given this paper a grade of A. In my estimation the writer has done all that can be expected in such a short space, though I have recommended to him that he should consider continuing this line of study in his graduate program.