

Discussed: pomo evangelists, scary stuff, Buddhist understanding, Ellen White, exorcising demons, heresies, Holy Ghost, pluralism

Christ the Light of the World: A Conversation with Myself

By *Julius Nam*

Why is this article given in question-and-answer format?

Because I couldn't find a good lead-in to the paper that I've been wanting to write for the last two weeks.

Isn't this a messier way to start? And isn't the question-and-answer format too risky?

Could very well be. I don't know. I've never done this before.

Has anyone else conducted a self-interview at a conference like this?

I don't know. I actually got this idea from Frederica Mathewes-Green who wrote her essay in question-and-answer format in the *Church in Emerging Culture*.

Which culture?

Today's postmodern culture. It's a book written by five "pomo"-friendly evangelicals about what today's church should look like and what the focus of its message ought to be.

Isn't postmodernism (or pomo, as you say) averse to pontificating on how anything should or ought to be?

Let's get to the main question. Our listeners don't think we're funny anymore.



What is the main question?

How Adventists can communicate the message of salvation through Christ effectively and meaningfully to various cultures of the world (including the secular postmodern) without compromising the heart of that message.

That's assuming a lot of things.

Like what?

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The late Francis Crick codiscovered the structure of DNA and later turned to neuroscience. In his book, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, he wrote; “You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and freewill, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.” Can science prove this? What difference does it make?

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Well, that bit about “salvation through Christ.” What does that really mean? Do all Adventists agree on its meaning?

That’s exactly where I wanted to begin. You seem to be reading my mind.

I am.

Stop interrupting me.

OK, let’s get on with it.

Scripture does make some sweeping claims about salvation coming from Christ and Christ alone. To deny this would be to rip the heart out of Christianity. Christ *is* the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to God except through Christ (John 14:6). Salvation is found in no one else’s name but that of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

My question, though, is that while we affirm the centrality of the supreme revelation of God in the incarnate Christ, couldn’t we also affirm the scriptural claim that the same Christ is the true light that gives light to everyone?

Could you unpack that last point?

The apostle John opens his Gospel by juxtaposing the metaphors of the Word and Light in reference to the incarnation of Jesus. John then states that this Light that gives light to everyone became flesh and lived among us (John 1:9, 14).

What this tells me is that Christ as the Eternal God had been engaged in the work of enlightening all of humanity with divine wisdom throughout history until the time of incarnation (and presumably has since been engaged in the same work).

My heresy detector has started to beep.

I know; I can hear it, too. This is a scary idea because it seems to open the way to the kind of pluralism that Christians and certainly Adventists have tended to abhor. But Adventists who hold the Bible as their creed—not anything else—neither the Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs, the writings of Ellen White, nor any other authority in our tradition—ought to take seriously the whole witness of Scripture, which I do not believe supports some of the traditional exclusivist claims of Western Christianity.

Let’s have it. What is it that you want to say?

We must not only be open to the possibility of Christ at work in every culture and religion, but we must also

actively seek out and learn from diverse manifestations of the Word of Christ in the world today. Just to give you one example: Christians have much to learn from the self-renouncing devotion of Buddhism.

We’re too much into filling up and enriching ourselves—even in spirituality (say, being “filled with the Holy Ghost”)—that we’ve all but lost the spirit of self-emptying that Christ has exemplified for us. Not only do we need to learn about self-renunciation as an abstraction, we also need to practice it as a holistic life endeavor.

Could the Buddhist understanding and commitment to *kenosis* be a manifestation of Christ’s revelation? I think it’s definitely worth exploring.

So you’re some sort of a relativist or a pluralist, or even a syncretist?

Be nice. I’ll admit to being some sort of a pluralist, but not the way you call it. Let’s please not get into pigeonholing each other by calling each other some kind of an “-ist,” and be satisfied that we have each other figured out and crossed out in our minds. That’s no way to treat a brother. That just ain’t right.

Sorry, man. Seems like I hit a raw nerve. But you can’t say that an average Seventh-day Adventist won’t be disturbed by what you’re saying.

Like I said before, this is scary stuff. It’s not easy, either. But like I said, I see so much openness toward the global work of Christ in Scripture. There are too many instances of God giving revelation to those who are outside the mainstream of Israel and Christianity.

Consider Melchizedek. Where did he come from? What about Balaam? Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. What about the magi from the East? Ellen White calls them pagan philosophers. What did it mean for them to see the light and adore our Savior? What exactly did God reveal to them? What can they teach us?

If, as Paul tells us, God’s invisible attributes have been clearly seen by the people of the world from the creation of the world, so that they are without excuse (which must be clearer than the sophistry of Christian theology that we often engage in), shouldn’t we seek to learn from what God has revealed to them?

What does this all mean?

Well, consider these prophetic words of Ellen White:



Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. (*Desire of Ages*, 638)

Wait! I just thought of another intriguing example. Remember the time when the disciples were so upset that someone other than the twelve was exorcising demons in Christ's name that they stopped the man, "because he was not one of us"?

Jesus responded by saying, "Do not stop him." What do you think we're supposed to get out of this little exchange?

I've always thought the episode only applied to intra-Christian differences.

Me too. But could it also apply to non-Christians who

are under the influence of Christ's light? Whose religion is Christianity anyway? Isn't it Christ's?

And isn't responding to Christ and being a follower of Christ more important than being a Christian? In light of the concept of the progressive understanding of the truth—which Christians in general and Adventists in particular (coupled with our view of the "present truth") accept, couldn't we embrace the possibility that the work of Christ is in progress right now in various cultures *and* religions of the world?

I wonder if the success of Christian missionary outreach in some parts of the world hasn't actually rolled back Christ's work among the local people. I wonder sometimes if the Christian missionary agenda is really one and the same with Christ's agenda for the people of the world.

What are you proposing here? Stop evangelizing? Call back all missionaries? I don't see how a Seventh-day Adventist who takes the remnant calling as well as the Gospel Commission seriously can defend what you're insinuating.

You're right. Probably not everything I'm suggesting is defensible. I don't presume to have all the theological

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Questions to be addressed:

- What elements of Adventist theology and practice will survive or should survive?
- How do you maintain your faith in the modern world of skepticism and science?
- If a prophet is growing, maturing, and changing—what do we do with the immature stuff?
 - Can the Adventist Church afford to lose Ellen White?
 - What religious legacy do we have to pass on to our children?
 - How do you handle fear of end-time events and fears of not being saved?
- How do you respond with grace when your daughter wants to marry a nice Catholic attorney and she's thinking of converting?

For complete information and application contact

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loose ends tied up. In fact, my theology is probably more like a loose ball of yarn than a tightly knit cardigan.

I'll say this, though. What I'm proposing, to be frank with you, is a fundamental shift in the way we view evangelism. Fulfillment of the Gospel Commission and our worldwide evangelism should be more about sharing Christ than making people Adventists.

I've deliberately used the word *share* to suggest interactivity and mutuality. Missionary and evangelistic efforts should never be a one-way affair, but a two-way dialogue—sharing what Christ the Light has revealed in each of our lives, teaching one another of the revelations of the Eternal, and growing together in obedience to the shared revelations.

As Brian McLaren suggests in *A New Kind of Christian*, the object of evangelism, then, becomes conversation, not conversion. This is not to say that conversions could not or should not happen. Conversions will occur when Christ leads individuals to new communities.

I'm sorry to bring this up again, but this all sounds really too pluralistic for me.

I understand, and I do wonder how much pluralism and diversity we can take and live with—both internally with diverse expressions of Adventism and externally with other denominations and religions.

Like I said, I'll admit to being a pluralist, but only in this sense: As Adventists, we need to constantly affirm how God has raised up our church and continues to lead it in a special way. I do believe that God has given our church a remnant calling to herald to the world special truths for our time. At the same time, we can be open to the presence and work of God in the faith and life of individuals and communities in other denominations and religions.

We ought to be sensitive to other possible revelations of God and do our best to understand and embrace God's truth found everywhere, even while actively sharing and persuading the world of what God has entrusted to us. It ought to be possible to be deeply convicted of the gospel as we understand it and have experienced it, without negating other expressions of faith or devaluing other traditions.

We need to be as orthodox as we can be, while being as generous as we possibly can be toward others. So, as for this "p"-word that you've been throwing at me, I think Lamin Sanneh has put it well: "For all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is

the cornerstone of the universal design" (*Translating the Message*, 29).

Are you sure you're not creating an elaborate theological scheme to justify your personal discomfort, or even embarrassment, with traditional evangelism?

Hmmm, actually, you may be on to something. I am deeply embarrassed and highly uncomfortable with what evangelism has become. To put it crassly, our message has been: "You believe like us, you behave like us, then we'll let you belong to our church."

It seems to me that, with a nod to Richard Rice's book *Believing, Behaving, Belonging*, the process should really happen the other way around. First, "we accept you and embrace you just as you are (belonging)." Second, "we want to serve you and be served by you so that we may increase the quality of our lives and find healing in our lives (behaving)." Finally, "we desire to share with you what God has taught us, as we desire to learn from your experience with God (believing)."

I think our time is almost up. Do you think the question-and-answer format worked?

I may never get invited to this conference again.

How strongly do you stand by the heresies you have expressed today?

As you and I know, the word *heresy* means a "faction" or "portion." Paul's words come to mind at this juncture: "For we know in part and we prophesy in part" (1 Cor. 13:9). Our incomplete understanding makes all of us heretics, really.

Early Adventism, in retrospect, was a cult and a heretical movement, wasn't it? Remember the shut door doctrine and the anti-Trinitarianism of almost all our pioneers? Come to think of it, the Good Samaritan, too, was a "heretic."

I have a nagging feeling that God doesn't mind heretics too much. God can still use them for the cause of the gospel in reaching the lost. I'd like to be one of them.

Julius Nam is assistant professor of religion at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. He hasn't stopped talking to himself. (It's mostly useless solipsistic chatter, though.)