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# An Adventist Identity for Postmodern Youth

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## Abstract

*During the teenage period, a youth shapes his or her identity in confirmation with the group he or she belongs to. The identity our church provides at that stage is a particular modern identity shaped by a modern rational world-view. At a later stage, our youth will find themselves in conflict with the identity provided by the church and their own mainly postmodern world-view. In this paper, I will explore the possible changes in our identity that will have to take place in order to accommodate the postmodern world-view. I will also argue that the church has to accommodate this world-view, though not uncritically, as it is no longer an option. I hope that this will enable us to find the boundaries of our flexibility and our willingness to adapt to a new way of thinking.*

**A** profound feeling of urgency seems to take hold of youth workers, pastors, and directors, specifically in the western hemisphere. Even though the General Conference brings promising reports of church growth and expansion forward, one cannot escape the problem of “youth retention” or “membership retention.” Specifically, with the second, third, and fourth generation, the church faces a huge difficulty in retaining its membership. Linked to this challenge is the awareness of an emerging world-view, which seems to challenge the church’s predominate world-view resulting in a possible identity crisis.

Our youth are confronted with both challenges at the same time. On the one hand, our youth are carving out their identity, and on the other hand, they have adopted a postmodern world-view that causes tension with the church’s world-view. I will explore the relationship between the provided identity of the church and the postmodern world-view and how our church may have to adapt their provided identity to enable our youth to be both Adventist and postmodern.

## In Search of Identity

James Fowler in his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* introduces a faith-development theory that identifies six distinct stages of faith. These stages have been identified after extended research in other psychological theories as

well as numerous interviews with people from all ages and religious backgrounds. Fowler has a very wide definition of faith; it is defined as a universal quality of life in which someone relates to someone or something else. Often this quality of life is shaped by a religion, but it is not the same thing (Fowler, 1981). One could say Fowler has identified stages of faith interaction. The different descriptions of the stages, however, do fit the more narrow definition of faith as used by Christian organizations.

Out of the six identified stages, only stages three and four are relevant for this paper. The other stages deal mainly with a younger audience, pre-teen or a much more mature audience, thirty-plus. Stage 3 is identified as the *synthetic-conventional* stage, and it generally applies to the teenage stage of life; however, Fowler indicates that all ages feel comfortable at this stage. Jack Pressau, in his book *I’m Saved, You’re Saved – Maybe* (1977) describes this stage as having that “arrived feel” to it; many believers do not develop beyond this stage, and many churches operate at this stage of faith.

The synthetic-conventional stage is characterized by the idea of developing an integrated identity (the synthetic element) which is derived from a group of significant others (the conventional element). These significant others may be their school or neighborhood peers, but also their youth group or church leaders. The youth are trying to make sense of their lives and use significant others to provide their identity. This often results in the adoption of deep

convictions, which are not critically examined and often unaware. “At stage 3 a person has an ideology, a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified these for examination and in a sense is unaware of having them” (Fowler, 1981, p. 173).

Teenagers, especially in their late teens, are greatly committed to the identity they adopt at this stage. Even though

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research has not yet been done on this topic, indirectly the Valuegenesis study may provide some insight. In my experience there seems to be an apparent contradiction in the orthodoxy and orthopraxies of youth. Late teenagers seem to be very much attracted to a very orthodox version of our faith and, therefore, a clear identity, yet in practice they appear

very moderate. A teenager may be very orthodox when it comes down to our doctrines, yet at the same time not have a problem with alcohol or certain uncommon behavior during Sabbath hours (e.g., shopping, sports, etc.).

Fowler identifies this apparent conflict or contradiction as *compartmentalization*. A youth tries to compartmentalize his life as he moves from one role to the next. These *theaters of action* are different roles a youth has to live up to. This *living up to* is something characteristic of this stage. Self-identity is tied up very closely to the judgments and expectations of the significant others. Another strategy to live up to these expectations is a *hierarchy of authorities*, whereby the expectations and authority of one group is seen as primary and others must fall below these (Fowler, 1981).

At this stage, youth are very much committed to a church and experience it as an extended family to whom one needs to stay loyal. In general, conflict is avoided, and new critical ideas are not thought of as a positive contribution to the “family.” Churches that reinforce the idea of having arrived at, as suggested by Pressau, tend to be attractive to the believers at this stage, as they provide a *walled in* religious commitment, a clear identity. Generally, any change in policy or practice by a significant other or officially sanctioned leaders will lead to a crisis in faith or serious objections.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church functions largely at this stage. It provides, mainly in its outreach, a *walled-in* religious commitment. In its official and its informal teachings, it upholds an exclusive faith and identity, whereby

others, even of the same religion (e.g., Christians), are seen as fundamentally different. Any changes in official policy, awareness of diversity in praxis or seemingly contradictory behavior of official leaders, is seen as an undermining of the church’s identity and ultimately of one’s own identity.

Fowler suggests that his Faith Development Theory describes not only a personal development but also a societal development whereby the different stages, particularly stages two, three, and four, describe the pre-modern, modern, and postmodern world-views (Fowler, 2001, p. 163). Applied to the Adventist situation the church is mainly operating at the third stage and, therefore, with a predominate modern world-view.

Karen Armstrong in her book *The Battle for God* identifies the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a typical modern rationalistic church. She identifies two elements that justify this identification. First, our calculated interpretation of the prophecies and our rationalistic approach to the Bible is seen as a characteristic of the modern era. The second is our democratization of the Bible, the idea that everyone can read and interpret the Bible, a founding principle of our hermeneutics (Armstrong, 2001, p. 110). We may not find anything offensive in her characterization, as both elements are a characteristic of who we are. Yet these make us also a church with a typical modern world-view.

Several elements cause the provided identity of the church to be in conflict with the world-view and thinking of our teenagers and specifically our young adults. We will explore these elements, as they are a key in understanding the need to adjust our identity. Three elements that can be identified are societal changes in world-views, church practice, and the upward mobility of our youth.

## Societal Changes in Worldviews

Postmodernism seems to be the new buzz word, especially among church leaders and evangelists, the former often identifying it with the cause of all problems, the latter as the justification to adopt new evangelistic approaches. Even though philosophers, such as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1997), are still debating whether the current world-view, which is identified as postmodern, is really a transition between the modern era and the postmodern era, making it effectively still part of the modern era, or whether the change in thinking is significant enough to identify it as a new era, all agree that the modern era is coming to an end.

Scherer and Bevans in their book *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization* (1994) identify seven elements of *epochal change in our world*. These elements have contributed to the development of what is now called the postmodern world-view, making the world-view irreversible. These elements are:

1. We now live in a pluricentric, rather than western-dominated world, despite the fact the cold war is now over.
2. Structures of oppression and exploitation are today being challenged as never before.
3. A profound feeling of ambiguity exists about the value of western technology and development and the older idea of 'progress'.
4. We inhabit a shrinking global village with finite resources, and this calls for growing mutual interdependence.
5. Humans are for the first time aware of their capacity to destroy the earth and make it uninhabitable for future generations.
6. Societies everywhere now seek their own local cultural identities and reject slavish imitation of western models;
7. Freedom of religion and greater awareness of other faiths force Christians to re-evaluate their own earlier attitudes toward other faiths.

Many believers, especially in the third stage of faith, have a difficult time accepting the paradigm shift that these epochal changes have caused. They object to the relativistic approach to truth, the impossibility of transferring meaning and truth, and the allowance of diversity and differences among believers.

Elements 1, 3 and 7 are main contributors to the relativistic approach to truth. Furthermore the realization that language as transference of meaning is not referential but rather contextual has also contributed to this approach. Whereas in the modern world-view language, and especially texts, were seen as referential to the ideas of the writer, the postmodern world-view realizes that the ideas of the writer can never be traced again. A modern world-view would create different theological tools to dissect the text in order to discover the meaning of the text and therefore discover what the writer intended. The postmodern world-view will admit that it is the reader, in his or her social context, who will provide meaning to the text. A text in itself does not contain meaning, nor does it carry the meaning of the author.

Our teenagers and youth may not consciously read the Bible in this manner; however, they do apply the results of this thinking to their reading (if they read at all). Young people would much rather discuss what they believe the text says to them rather than finding out what the author meant with the text. Truth still exists, yet it is our *shared* truth, not necessarily *the* truth.

### Church Practice

Despite our predominate modern world-view, some of our practices on the administrative level are supportive and

constructive for the development of a postmodern world-view. Our ecumenical efforts, resulting in several joint declarations and bilateral conversations with other Christian denominations, are characteristic of a postmodern world-view. Rather than excluding other Christians from the truth, we recognize and appreciate the pluriformity of the Christian community. This recognition of pluriformity of the Christian community has been extended to our own community, realizing that Adventist truth and praxis is dependent on its social context.

Another factor is our principal stand on religious freedom. As indicated by Scherer and Bevans (1994) religious freedom contributes to the re-evaluation of one's own faith. This combined with mass-immigration, particularly in Western Europe, causes church administration to converse with the newly imported religions rather than seeking confrontation. "The encounter with experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflection on how one's beliefs and values have formed and changed, and on how relative they are to one's particular group or background" is seen by Fowler as one of the factors for the breakdown of the third stage of faith (Fowler in Stokes, 1983, p. 188).

A third praxis that contributes to a shift in world-view is our emphasis on education. Our church has chosen to promote and develop an extensive educational program, resulting in the largest Protestant educational system in the world. This emphasis on educational development indirectly helps our youth to move from the Synthetic-Conventional stage to the Individuative-Reflective stage (the fourth stage).

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### Upward Mobility of Our Youth

This element is both caused by our educational emphasis and the life-structure the church provides for new converts. Members in our church experience an upward mobility, though limited, which results in the breakdown of the third stage of faith. Education and a more complete knowledge of the surrounding world contribute to a more critical analysis of one's own faith and convictions, resulting in a more internalized and authentic faith, yet also a more critical and non-conformist faith.

In Western Europe, this breakdown tends to develop quicker with students of higher education, especially as these students encounter fellow students with different world-views, faiths, and practices. This is an indirect result of the lack of Adventist educational institutions on the European

continent. American Adventist youth tend to attend Adventist educational institutions, where a walled-in religion is easier maintained.

The fourth stage, indicated as the Individuative-Reflective stage, emphasizes the individual realization of one's identity. People at this stage tend to hold themselves and others more accountable for their own "authenticity, congruence, and consistency" (Fowler & Keen, 1985, p. 70). Through this development, youth see themselves as having a personal autonomous identity. Fowler says the following:

A person's reference group(s), for purposes of identification and inclusiveness in calculating moral responsibility may be quite wide. There is at least a formal recognition of the diversity and relativity of different group interests and an implicit recognition of the obligation to take the claims and perspectives of other groups (classes, ethnic or racial groups, national communities, religious communities, and the like) into account over against one's own (Fowler & Keen, 1985, p. 72).

At this point, the developmental stage seems to merge with characteristics of a postmodern world-view. The three before-mentioned elements are resulting in Adventist youth with a postmodern world-view, yet our church is still providing a mainly modern identity, hence resulting in a conflict between the provided identity and the world-view of the youth.

### **Moving From a Modern Identity to a Postmodern Identity.**

Jon Paulien in his latest book *Everlasting Gospel, Ever Changing World* (2008) identifies ten points of change, which characterize postmodernism:

- From confidence to suspicion
- From stability to disorientation
- From one truth to many
- From individualism to identity crisis
- From individualism to community
- From religion or no religion to spirituality
- From atomistic to holistic
- From exclusion to inclusion
- From knowledge to experience
- From truth-telling to story-telling

Despite having provided a short list as a definition of postmodernism, Paulien recognizes, along with other postmodern philosophers, that postmodernism is best defined by what it is not. Best and Kellner identify postmodernism as a reaction against modernism (Best & Kellner, 1997). whereas Coert Lindijer, a Dutch biblical theology professor, identifies postmodernism as describing a relationship with

modernism (Lindijer, 1998). Postmodernism is closely related to modernism, yet it is best described as how it differs from modernism.

Likewise, I would like to define an Adventist postmodern identity by identifying what it no longer is compared to a modern perspective. The postmodern identity would no longer lay a claim on possessing the truth; it rather takes a more humble approach to any truth claims. Any knowledge of God or eternal truth is only partial; no one religion or church can claim this truth. This would have an enormous influence on our approach to evangelism. It would also influence our understanding and use of the creation story in Genesis, as this entails a claim to ultimate truth.

The postmodern identity would no longer hold meta-narratives in high regard. All encompassing stories, which often are embedded in truth claims, have been shown to fail in the last century (fascism, communism and even capitalism). The Adventist theme of the Great Controversy would be an element to feel the pressure of postmodern thought. Our interpretation of the prophecies would not receive the emphasis that it normally gets in a modern worldview.

The postmodern identity would no longer feel comfortable with the "proof-text" method. A characteristic of postmodernism is its ideas about the transference of meaning, as mentioned earlier. The proof-text method assumes that one can use any biblical text to find out the independent meaning of any other biblical text; the Bible explains itself. This assumes that the biblical text has meaning of its own, rather than a meaning given to it by the reader. Bible study is no longer done to arrive at the true meaning of the text, but is done to share the experience one has with the text. The experience of religion in general would be central to the postmodern identity; the quest for spirituality would be regarded higher than the quest for truth.

Pete Ward in his book *Liquid Church* (2002) suggests that the church in the future should be more fluid, a dynamic notion of church as a series of relationships and communications. However, I would like to suggest a fluid church with several beacons that would create and maintain a shared identity. These beacons would be doctrines that managed to be translated into praxis. Any doctrine that remains a rational theoretical concept would not receive the amount attention it would normally get. The doctrines of the Sabbath, communion, baptism, and Christian living are some of the doctrines that could function as a beacon in the liquid church. These beacons, however, would only remain recognizable in its praxis; its theological motivation will ultimately change.

The postmodern identity would focus more on what is held in common with other Christians and other believers. Its particular praxis, unique to a particular church, would

be seen as part of a kaleidoscope of religious experiences and spirituality, rather than an expression of truth.

Teenagers and youth will still have to go through the third stage of faith development, so they will still be looking for a clear identity. The identity the church provides should help our teenagers and youth to cope with the next stage of faith and with their postmodern world-view. Our focus should be on providing an identity which stresses basic Christianity, which encourages a better understanding of what we share with other Christians, and which teaches our young people to listen to the voice of God in the Bible. Instead of providing a radical understanding of our particular truths, we should provide them with a radical understanding of Christ and what it means to be a follower of Him.

### Critical Notes

Some critical notes have to be made in regard to adopting a postmodern identity. A first criticism is an apparent moral bankruptcy; postmodernism not only relativizes truth, it also relativizes culture. The combination of both makes one very apprehensive in passing a moral judgment. Why should my contextualized cultural values be superior to someone else's contextualized cultural values, which might dictate him or her to act in a morally, for myself, objectionable manner? The modern concept of universal and shared values and norms should be maintained in a slimmed down version, yet enough to maintain the dignity of human life and individuals.

Another critical note would be concerning our evangelistic success. Our church has thrived on our particular evangelistic outreach. Our approach generates a walled-in religion being in a high degree of tension with the surrounding culture. Through this, the church offers a true alternative for people who are dissatisfied with what the wider culture has to offer. This idea is shared by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart (2008), who see the changes that took place during the sixties and seventies in our church as threat for church orthodoxy. The publication of *Questions on Doctrine* in the fifties and the line of thinking initiated by Robert Brinsmead and Desmond Ford in the seventies were attempts to lessen the tension with the surrounding culture and diminish differences with other Christian churches. Adopting or accommodating a postmodern identity would be more in line with the thinking started in the fifties and the seventies (incidentally identified as the start of postmodernism) which made us less effective at evangelizing. We would have to find another aspect that would make us different and, therefore, a true alternative from the wide culture, yet still postmodern in outlook.

Much more can be said about postmodernism and its influence on our message and identity. More critical points can be made about adopting or accommodating a postmodern identity. Yet I do believe our church has to face the issue and has to accommodate in some way or another newly emerging worldviews. We have to trust that God communicates His message of hope and love in all ages and eras. He has done so in the pre-modern era, in the modern era, and He will do so in the postmodern era. It is up to us whether we allow God to communicate His message to our postmodern youth through our church or not.

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