

RUBÉN MUÑOZ-LARRONDO

The Dis or Interested Politics of Discipleship: Some Reflections from the New Testament

Introduction

In this article, I revisit some strategies of discipleship in an effort to answer questions such as: Should we continue to remain apolitical, impartial, indifferent, or dis-interested in the “doings” of our church and world? I will argue for an interested and involved politics of discipleship; a strategy that takes a more active role in policy making for righteous causes simultaneously in the public square as well in the Adventist Church. I understand that the Early Christian Church dealt with binary dynamics of opposition to and from the power structures of the Roman Empire and the Judean establishment. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they worked for a multicultural independence, and at the same time, for a centralized and decentralized community of believers.

On the one hand, I am reading the signs of our times from the perspective of the theoretical and hermeneutical framework of critical theory and sociology of religion, not as a practitioner per se, but as a theologian and cultural critic, especially using the category of the return and visibility of religion and its rise in fundamentalism in the public square in liberal democracies and depoliticized societies where God has been pushed to the margins. On the other hand, I am reading as a South American Adventist minister working and educated in the North, and as a firm believer in our tradition of eschatological prophecy and its understanding of religious supremacy.

I argue that critical theory assessments and political theology (Inglehart 1997; see also Inglehart 1977; Hoogvelt 1997; Cavanaugh, Bailey, and Hovey 2012; Bauckham, 2011) of these issues should serve as a wakeup

call to Adventists in order to create a necessary awareness and at the same time revisit our strategies for discipleship. As a society, we are experiencing a pendulum shift from a liberal depoliticized practice that has shunned God and the efforts to enforce Christian values.

I plan to present some trends from the perspective of the sociology of religion, then to consider some of my views on the early Christian church, followed by a few conclusions.

I do not presume to be an expert in critical theories and cultural studies; thus, these are initial attempts to map out the political-religious situation of our time. However, I think it is wise to re-evaluate some premises concerning the return of religion to the public square. I will pause to describe some of these premises.

Characteristics of the Hermeneutical Framework

During recent years, scholars of critical theory, cultural studies, and sociology of religion point out that we should pay attention to how the pendulum effect may change Christian's views, with the rise of fundamentalism in the Christian belief system. Sociologists warn that the "three interrelated practices [of]—capitalism, depoliticization, and secularism—have, then, continued to exert a most profound impact on Christianity because the countries of the world that are most secularist and most capitalist (and perhaps most depoliticized) are also those dominated by the Christian tradition" (Ward 2009:268). Therefore, some identify the call for a repoliticization of Christianity as a warning sign that the separation between religion and state will be destroyed. Ward further states, "In terms of modernity and its concurrence with the secular age, the separation of religion from the political inevitably encourages depoliticization. In fact, the more secular we are, the more depoliticized we will become" (268).

James K. A. Smith, editor of the series *The Church and the Postmodern Culture*, states,

It could be argued that developments in postmodern theory have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related "effect" of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find nondenominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestants churches, and Catholics parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches. (2009:11)

Christian Smith argues that the secularization of America was not the natural result of modernization and the industrialization of society; rather, it was an intentional political process that worked to overcome and overthrow religious control over public knowledge. As a result, religion in general and the Protestant Christian church in particular were gradually put outside the public square (2003: 6, 7).

Gerard Alexander commenting on secularization and the role of religion states,

Sociological research on religious practice is complex. Common predictions about U.S. conservatism draw on the research tradition that identifies long-term declines in rates of individual religious belief and practice in increasingly affluent and educated societies. American secularization may lag Western European trends, but is widely assumed to be both under way and an inevitable feature of modernity. (2014:127)

And citing Christian Smith, Alexander states:

History, including twentieth-century history, has witnessed enough significant cultural swings over multi decade periods to suggest that insisting on unidirectionality seems analytically unjustified. Note that this is not to predict another Great Awakening or a reversal of the very gradual decline in American religious practice discernible across the postwar period. Rates of belief and practice could also fall more quickly over the next few decades. But there have been enough reversals and Great Awakenings, including ones that appear impacted by political processes, that it seems foolhardy to engage confidently in straight-line projections of continued decline. (2014:129)

Sociologists also state that the events of 9/11 became the Christian wakeup call for the return and visibility of religion, where “religion cannot be a matter of private convictions, for it wears an increasingly public face” (Ward 2009:264), and contrary to what it was before, shows a *depoliticization* of religion made by the liberal democracies to be “an inter-Christian affair” (264). They state that “Christian thinkers and politicians . . . ushered in secularism and pushed God to the margins of what mattered socially, culturally, and scientifically. God became at best a hidden hand, a concealed clockmaker, and at worst an irrelevance, a lingering superstition” (Ward 2009:264).

Recently, in an interview with David Brody, *CBN News*, the Republican Candidate for the presidency argued that the federal government has “taken a lot of the power away from the church. I want to give power back to the church because the church has to have more power. Christianity

is really being chopped; little by little it's being taken away." (Brody 2016). According to him, the bill passed during the Lyndon Johnson era restricted the participation of pastors and ministers in politics. As a result, Christianity has lost its power to influence society. His proposition is to allow pastors to speak not only in favor of Christian principles, but to get involved in secular politics without losing their tax exempt status. In reality, the goal fulfills the long desire of evangelicals to return the Christian church to a prominent, if not central role in political and social life in the United States of America.

Considering these characteristics, true discipleship must reveal who we are and how we relate to others (Hauerwas 1983:97). The church was given the mandate to preach the coming kingdom of God, therefore, discipleship must be interested because it is partisan, and it requires sacrifice, "leaving everything behind," sharing and satisfying the needs of everyone. It looks for rewards because, it is interested in the salvation of others. Discipleship is political because "it does not bring peace but a sword" (Matt 10:34). It results in persecution for those who live as the Master did, rescuing people from oppression and offering physical and spiritual liberation. According to John Howard Yoder, "Theology is political—indeed, perhaps politics at its most raw—because we are treating ultimate power, authority, and jurisdiction" (1972:24).

These warning calls should preoccupy any church, especially ours, because of practices associated with capitalism and its methods of accruing money, and with secularism in regard to our self-understanding of eschatological and prophetic positions regarding the separation of Church and State. These warnings may limit our options and strategies for an open discipleship.

The Return and Visibility of Religion

I will mention some "events" that mark the return and visibility of religion, with some comments from the philosopher Jünger Habermas and Catholic theologian Hans Küng.

The well-known philosopher and "methodological atheist" Jünger Habermas, who has predicted the decline of Christianity as public religion, now "has been calling the attention to reclaim the value of religion and its role as source of commitment and responsibility in a society where the sense of justice, including all moral and legal regulation are disappearing" (Habermas 2006, my translation). He seeks to restore the notion of an equalitarian universalism and the moral emancipation of the individual conscience as contemporary inheritances of Jewish ethics and Christian ethics of love (Küng 2011).

Habermas stated in a recent interview, “Think of the economic calculation, which invades justice and undermines the criminal law. Think of the examples of the privatization of war, administration of prisons, power supply and the health system. The State leaves key elements of the protection of the public good to the [liberal] market. Everywhere, policy regulations, as well as legislative and moral, are disappearing and are replaced by calculations of benefits” (Habermas 2006).

Concerning the political triumph of President George W. Bush, Habermas speaks of alliances between evangelicals and Catholics in the United States that gave a great vitality and “new interest” to the Catholic Church and renovated religion in general. It seems to be easier for Europeans to distinguish the state of affairs than for their US counterparts. For liberal materialists and rationalists, the dialogues maintained since September 2001 after 9/11 between Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger or Pope Benedict 16th are a call to “nervous attention.” The dialogues of Habermas with the Jesuit School for Philosophy in Munich about faith and reason in a post-secular world are similar. Both dialogues have been published in *Dialectics of Secularization* (Ratzinger and Habermas, 2007) and *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Habermas 2010).

Georgetown University President, John J. DeGioia, in his introduction of Jünger Habermas in his presentation “Myth and Ritual” for *The Berkley Center Lecture Series*, Oct 19th, 2011, states:

In more recent years his work has sought more deeply to understand the position of religion and modernity, considering the rise of secular liberal states with certain kinds of religious participation particularly in the West, he recognizes, “indispensable potentials for meanings that are preserved in religious language, potentials *that philosophy is not yet fully exhausted.*” (2011)

Likewise, Rodney Pearson in the *American Thinker Magazine* states “Habermas believes that even for self-identified liberal thinkers, *‘to exclude religious voices from the public square is highly illiberal’*” (2014).

Among Catholic circles these times of renewal have been received with great optimism. Priest Pablo Blanco, from the Universidad de Navarra, commenting on these dialogues, states:

We should not lose our identity, if we follow peace, “reciprocally we must cure our pathologies and the excess of fundamentalism, because the dreams of the reason produced monsters referring to Auschwitz and Hiroshima”. . . . The communicative reason of Habermas it is not a rationalistic one, as the modernity understood it, *but it is a new reason.* (2015)

Similarly, another front of these new sea-changes in the public square is the dialogue between the leading Catholic reformer and scholar Hans Küng, and the hierarchy of the church. In March 2016, *The National Catholic Reporter* printed an open letter to Pope Francis, discussing questions of discipleship and doctrinal position. Küng asks “Where are you leading this church of ours? . . . The reform will move forward with determination, clarity and firm resolve, since *Ecclesia semper reformanda*” (Küng 2016).

In the documentary “*Hacia una Teología Universal*” (*Toward a Universal Theology*), from the UNED—the only online university sponsored by the State of Spain—Hans Küng, Manuel Fraijó, and Mónica Cavalle, Catholics scholars, speak about the return of religion to the public square as “something that was unthinkable a few decades ago,” and “something that has political, social and public weight.” They see these developments as “unavoidable and urgent,” establishing a church that “will move toward a positive and humble church.” In addition, they state that “the history of philosophy has a double destiny, on the one hand, it cannot renounce the truth,” especially as a solution to “fraudulent wars for power, the fear to the ecumenism, and the ghost of fear for the Other.” The same is true concerning the liberal democracies and the fruit of modernity (and triumphalism, thus avoiding the future rise of fundamentalism. What is needed, they ask? “It is a genuine and mature spirituality and possible interreligious dialogue . . . someone may say that this is utopic and that never will be reached, especially for the historical truth” (UNED 2011).

I highlight these comments to stress the importance of reading the signs of *our* times as Adventists, especially when witnessing vital changes seen for the first time in the history of this country, such as Pope Francis addressing the US Congress in a joint session as the leader of “the largest religious body in this country.” The *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) states in its webpage that “approximately 23 percent of the U.S. population identifies itself as Catholic, *the largest religious body in this country*.” The NCR is the only significant alternative Catholic voice that provides avenues for expression of diverse perspectives, promoting tolerance and respect for differing ideas.” Similarly, adventurer Simon Reeves from the BBC in a program about discovering a revival of religious faith in China, “*Sacred Rivers: The Yangtze*” in 2014, recounts that in China, thanks to the economic development, there is a post-material society of an affluent middle class of more than 300 million people. In addition, to find what Communism or Capitalism were not able to give, people now are turning to religion. China today has more than 100 million Christians, and it is expected that in the next 30 years the Christian population will reach almost 400 million, thus “becoming the largest Christian country in the world” (Reeves, 2014). Other studies predict the change will occur in 15 years (Phillips 2016).

The World Has Changed

The world has changed in time and cultural space with its standpoints of difference and otherness. This should make people aware that the world is no longer what it was supposed to be, at least in terms of the uniform and universality. The strategies and institutions of the past may not allow the church to reach this world. Biblical theology or politics in general call for a re-evaluation of the power structures in our institutions and in the life of the church. This call is not a new one. George Knight wrote that “the only viable choice is to critique radically (yet rationally) the denomination’s structures, procedures, policies, etc.” (1991:8). Knight clearly presents as a plan of the devil the increasing hierarchical structuralism of the Church: “*If I were the devil I would create more administrative levels and generate more administrators.* In fact, if I were the devil I would get as many successful Church employees as far from the scene of action as possible. I would put them behind desks, cover them with paper, and inundate them with committees. If that wasn’t enough, I would remove them to so-called ‘higher’ and ‘higher’ levels until they had little direct and sustained contact with the people who make up the Church” (2000:14). Should these concerns and decisions at annual councils make us think of possible dangers of schism in our church?

Graham Ward defines “political” in the context of institutional variables that “define our relationship with the church as an ‘act that entails power’ experienced” in an (a) “act of subjection (an act that puts things into a higher key that favors the individual or institution that is acting), as (b) liberation (acts that deconstruct the hierarchy that is involved in subjection), or (c) maintenance of the status quo. Power in this sense is not an entity . . . but it is the social operation with respect to relations between people and the institutions to which these people belong” (2009:27; 2005:79-89, 96-116).

This definition reminds us that our decisions, strategies, presuppositions and life-styles in general in the church and outside are motivated by politically interested decisions. As “time is a social mode power” and “money an economic motive power” (Ward 2009:29), our relationships support our institutions with our tithes and offerings and with the gift of our time to the appointed offices and institutions they represent.

Disaffected democracies and institutions make members, pastors, and employees frustrated and alienated from their leaders and denominations. Representations of this issue may be seen in the so-called emergent churches, the non-denominational churches, the anti-congregationalism, etc. On the other hand, globalism reflects the diversity unappreciated by many for its disorder and lack of properness. There is no need for us to

follow these representations and nomenclature of neoliberals or post-material citizens which are open to a new set of changes of acceptances of the world that perhaps as Christians we are not able to accept. However, in the context of the church, we must constantly review the implementation of policies that govern the life of the church. Perhaps, the problematic issue may be that some of our leaders are still incapable of hearing or even reacting to the decline and death of metanarratives and other categories of our liberal democracies and post-cultural settings.

Every generation must recheck the situationalization or the life of the church amid the changes in society and the renewal of implementations for strategies to reach those who have not been touched by the message of gospel of salvation for all, based on the almost universalist mandate that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:13). The problem is not that we, the tenants of globalization, have been entrenched in the camp of the church, or as Ward expresses it, “Globalization is thus intimately bound to religion, its triumphal myths of salvation for all, its promises of profoundly fulfilling what a human being yearns for, and its metaphysics. It is therefore no coincidence that the contemporary phase of globalization parallels the return of religion to the public sphere in new, not necessarily institutional, forms.” I do not agree, however that “all postmaterialist values may be asserted and substantiated” (2009:79, the complete quote reads: “It also follows that awareness of the masked theologies and metaphysics of globalization needs to be drawn out and developed so that the postmaterialist values may be asserted and substantiated”).

Our reconstruction of the changes in the world as we read and re-contextualize the Scriptures shows that several non-negotiable principles must be sought. The Scriptures call each individual as well as the institutions that the church represents to repentance, renewal, and reformation. The opportunity and invitation of salvation for everyone should not be confused with the universalistic expectation of globalization or as Ward puts it, “the triumphal myths of salvation” (79). Proselytism seen in terms of absolute conversion and gaining new adherents, or “*stealing sheep*,” must be re-focused. God is in control and he is the Shepherd of “*other sheep who do not belong to his fold*” as well (John 10:16). Though the term of the other may be conflictive, we must trust that he is sovereign in regard to the timing and circumstances and venues of how they will hear his voice and come. There will be one flock eschatologically. We do not presume that all of them/us will be all Christians, much less Adventists! That remains in the Sovereignty of God, who says, “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). Nevertheless, someone must still go in order for them to hear. Are we to respond like “some of Jews who were divided because of these words”? (John 10:19).

The whole postmaterialist thesis suggests that “their values change—orientated now towards quality-of-life issues such as human rights, personal liberties, community, aesthetic satisfaction and the environment” (Inglehart 1997:99-115; 1990) can only work as the premise states, “As a people moves out of economic instability, where basic survivor values such as food and physical security dominate, their values change” (Ward 2009:81).

The world has changed! With all the suffering in the world, some migratory policies are denying hope and thousands of individuals are killed for their faith; countries are closing their borders to protect the purity of their traditions and individualism. (The so-called decision of Great Britain of *Brexit*, seems like just one of many that may come up in succession). The instability created by the long-term positions held by leaders in our churches and institutions in different parts of the world reflect more of the same lethargic strategies, and suffocate the development of new leadership, thus avoiding natural growth and denying opportunities to young people, who are waiting and silenced. The upcoming US election carries with it terrifying consequences for the whole world—the threatening premonition of the deportation of millions and the fear of isolating others based on their beliefs from their own communities in a country which has heretofore opened the door to them. From indicators such as these, the question remains, should we continue to remain apolitical, impartial, indifferent or dis-interested in the “doings” of our church and world?

The easiest but sometimes most confusing and deceiving eschatological axioms that *this is not our world*, and *everything will be destroyed*, and the apolitical readings of otherworldly hopes still instill in us the hopes of a better world—out-of-this-world. However, we sometimes forget the request and grand commission of Jesus in his prayer, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world . . . they do not belong to the world . . . *but I have sent them into the world*” (John 17:16-18 emphasis added). Generally, we emphasize the first part about not belonging to the world and receiving protection from the evil one, but it may be argued that the central focus of the prayer is the great commission in Jesus’ request. “I am sending them into the world”—that must compel us not to remain impassive and silenced, neither for the politics of this world nor for the church. With this in mind we can liberate some reflections from the New Testament based on the life of the early Christian church, especially in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Early Christian Church Tenants and Challenges

The New Testament church begins with the conclusion that “everyone

who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). In Acts, the church is not a hierarchical one. It is guided by the direction of the Holy Spirit in a world that is not obliged to serve either the power structures of the Empire or Judaism (Muñoz-Larrondo 2012:75-115; 117-175).

Some feel uncomfortable viewing the Apostle Paul as chameleon-like in his strategy, and with his views of how to discern and read the signs of his time, as someone who will become all things to all people:

I’m an apostle to you, though if to others I’m not an apostle, although *I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible.*²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I *became like one under the law--* though I myself am not under the law-- to win over those under the law.²¹ To those outside the law I became like one outside the law-- though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ-- to win over those outside the law.²² To the weak *I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some.*²³ All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. (1 Cor 9:19-23, emphasis mine)

In the other group of *morality* and *grand majority* stands people like the well-known preacher Haddon Robinson (Henderson 2004:10), who compares the first century to our present reality. He states,

Christians today are not far from the first century. In effect, we live in a pre-Christian culture. The majority of men and women in our society have little knowledge of God. Christians are written off as political radicals who are devoted to bashing lesbians and homosexuals and who show no sympathy for woman carrying babies they had not planned. We lived with inhabitants of the culture which now approves an embraces lifestyle that [several] years ago . . . people condemned. We cringe at the way the media misunderstands and misrepresents us. . . .

Like Paul in the ancient world, Christians today must understand and adjust to the mindset of our neighbors. We must be willing to adopt to others people’s way of thinking in order to win them to the Savior. . . . It demands that we pursue uncomfortable questions: How do they think? What do they value? How do we accommodate to their beliefs without abandoning our own? What is negotiable and what is not? How do we speak to moderns so that they would understand?

The challenge of the Christian community post-resurrection is to proclaim the continuation of the kingdom of God under the dead and resurrected king. Of course they understand the kerygma of their proclamation, Jesus’ resurrection—when he ascended to heaven to receive

his glorification. However, questions of self-identity remain. What does it mean to follow Jesus? What are the values that will guide our interactions not only among ourselves but also with Gentiles? How will we react to the oppressive power structures of the Roman Empire?

The New Testament does not address these questions in a specific manner. It seems that the New Testament writers give a pastoral response to all of these questions and more. *Mathetes*, discipleship, is the language of pedagogy that Christ through the Spirit will guide you in all the truth (John 16:13).

Michael Green in the book *Thirty Years that Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (2004) recalls several characteristics of the early Christian church in their lifestyle, methods, approaches, leadership, priorities, etc. (These can be summarized as dedication, enthusiasm, joy, faith, endurance, holiness, spiritual power, generosity, prayer, transformation, flexibility, wholeheartedness, and care for each other, and training by active discipling.)

Acts has been rightly called the *Gospel of the Spirit* by Justo Gonzalez (2001) while others still prefer to look for differences between the Pauline and Petrine churches. This gospel begins with the universalist maxim, quoting the Old Testament and the eschatological hope of the people of Israel that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). It is true that for Luke, as the author, this Lord of the OT corresponds to Jesus, as the only “name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (4:12); and that he is the “Jesus *Christos*—the Messiah of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (4:10).

Jesus is now “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36) who “God has made both *Kurios-Lord* and *Christos-Messiah*” (2:36). This bifocality of titles relates to each of the power structures that oppress the *ecclesia* of God, namely the Roman Empire and the institutions that defined Judaism in those days. It is in this bifocality that God does not show partiality (10:34) and “anyone who fears him is acceptable to him” (10:35). It is this group of people who have decided to follow him that he has chosen as witnesses to “preach to the people and to testify that he is the one man ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead . . . that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sin though his name” (10:42, 43).

I propose that the book of Acts as the *Gospel of the Spirit* presents several categories regarding discipleship applicable for the church of today:

1. *Universal acceptance regardless of necessary indoctrination.* The invitation is open to all without discrimination, even to those who are not doctrinally prepared to receive further indoctrination, as in the case of the apostle Peter who discriminated against Cornelius, “calling him profane or unclean.”

Furthermore, Peter still seems to be under the regulations of the oral law or Levitical concerns—“you yourself know that it’s unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (Acts 10:28) (Keener 2013:1786-1792). Likewise, the apostle Paul in his interaction with the Philippian jailer establishes this universal acceptance to anyone without much concern for indoctrination: “Believe in the Lord Jesus (κύριον Ἰησοῦν), and you shall be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

2. *God works out his own plan independent of people’s witness.* The sovereignty and independence of God shows people being moved physically from one place to another (Philip). Doubtful representatives such as former criminals and torturers (Saul-Paul) are chosen. God even listens to Gentiles contrary to the church and the functionaries of the institution (Cornelius and the circumcision party).

3. *The Independence of the Holy Spirit.* People under the influence of the Holy Spirit decided to work outside the boundaries of what the church as an institution allowed (speaking to non-Jews, Acts 11:20). Contrast the duality of those who “spoke the word to no one except Jews” with those who “spoke to the Hellenist also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.” The Holy Spirit forbids Paul to enter some regions, and does not allow “the one sent to hear what you have to say”, to finish the same message, being interrupted with the outpouring of the glossolalia. As Peter will recall later, “As I began to speak the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning” — “giving the same gift that he gave us” (10:44; 11:15,17).

4. *The church of God acts in coordination and differentiation at the same time in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Antioch.* There is not a unilateral voice of God in one church or group. There is diversity in name and organization. There is no common name for the groups of believers: several names are used such as *The Way of God, the Way of the Lord, the Nazaraei, Christianoi, and the Hairesis.*

5. *There is diversity in allowing some to be re-baptized while others, such as Apollo, who is ‘boiling in the Holy Spirit’ (18:25, literal translation), remain unbaptized in the name of Jesus.* Apollo is even encouraged to visit other churches in Achaia. Quite to the contrary, the twelve ignorant Ephesian disciples were obliged to be re-baptized. (Perhaps, this group is different than the Ephesians elders (*presbuteroi*) summoned to Miletus (Acts 20:17).

6. *Submission to ecclesiastical authorities.* Peter leaves Jerusalem in his self-exodus and disappears from the narrative in Acts in order for James, the brother of the Lord, to assume the leadership and decision-making. “I have reached the decision that we should not trouble” 15:19; “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to impose on you no further burden than these essentials” (15:28). Similarly, the Apostle Paul submitted passively before what I call the Christian Sanhedrin in front of “James and *all the*

elders” (20:18), in order to elucidate the accusations against him, “what then is to be done?” (20:22). Later he is found and arrested, his ministry is shut down, he is in need of defending himself in front of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and finally incarcerated and deprived of his public ministry to the Gentile churches. As a good disciple who understands the incipient hierarchical relation in the institutional church, the Lukan Paul submits to the teacher-disciple relationship—though according to Galatians, none of the Jerusalem Council were Paul’s teachers. On the contrary, “they have contributed nothing to me” (Gal 2:6).

Interested or Disinterested

The motivations of our meritorious actions inform us in our politics of mission and discipleship. Do we have an interested or uninterested desire to win the confidence of our neighbors, relatives’ visitors in our churches, and friends? As Adventist Christians we have received the inspired counsel that we must first *win the confidence of the people*, and then invite them to follow Jesus (White 1959:143). Are we being dishonest when we try to win their confidence for the sole purpose of inviting them to follow Jesus? Some may question if this process is honest or dis-interested. Of course, we understand that this statement reflects the context in which we must serve the needs of the people through disciple-making. In this sense our service seems to be an interested one, not self-serving but an expression of grasping God’s love for anyone who demands such grace. Furthermore, discipleship is only dishonest if confidence-winning is done for the sole purpose of bringing people to the church for our own benefit.

On the one hand, our strategies of discipleship must emulate the early Christians who were not able to keep silent about what “they have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20), who “were chosen by God as witnesses. . . . he commanded us to preach these things” (10:41-42). On the other hand, there is always the tension of the meritorious reward, either in a temporal or eschatological appreciation. The gospels contain several instances where the apostles asked Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you, what will be our reward?” (Matt 19:27; Mark 10:28; Luke 18:28) or, in the astonished Markan version, “Lo! Behold, we are here.” Or the Lukan version, “we have left our own or ourselves” in order to follow you (τὰ ἴδια ἠκολουθήσαμέν σοι, Luke 18:28).

Jesus did not promise in vain with the hyperbolic subjective, “a hundred more times” or “many times as much” now in this time and in the age to come, the eternal life. Mark mentions the rewards, but also the persecutions, for those who have left everything. It is not surprising that afterward some of the disciples follow Jesus in fear (καὶ ἀκολουθοῦντες

ἐφοβοῦντο, Mark 10:32). Whatever the case, this seems to be a decent motive for discipleship.

Similarly, Protestants throughout history have encountered many problems with meritorious acts of service. The parables and narratives concerning the cost of discipleship in Luke 14 illustrate this issue, repeating Mark's list of family members, and adding "carrying their own cross" and/or "giving up all possession" as conditions for those who want to follow Jesus. If they do not do so, "[they] cannot be my disciple[s]" (14:26). These alleged harsh requirements work as responses to the parables and stories of "those who want to exalt themselves" and perhaps to those who are always expecting a form of repayment even at the time of the resurrection, Jesus therefore invites the blind, the lame, and those who are not able to repay, "for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

Likewise, the prodigal son, in a moment of grace and self-understanding, thought about the rewards of his home, his former polis, where he belonged: "How many hired-servants" (*misthoi*, a different word than *douloi*-slaves) "have abundance of bread in my-father's home, [ἐγὼ δὲ λιμῶ ὡδὲ ἀπόλλυμαι, Luke 15:17] and I'm being destroyed or perishing here of hunger." The desperate situation of this prodigal who does not belong to any *polis* or to any political entity that may guarantee his rights is now treated worse than an animal, wanting to be satiated or filled from their food (χαρτάζω), "but no one gave him anything" (Luke 15:16).

It is in this scenario of profound misery that his act of "coming back to his senses" (v. 17) allows and motivates him to *get up, to resurrect again*, thinking at the same time of the abundance of bread and the rewards of being considered in the hierarchical strata not as a son, but at least as a daily-hired servant, and of the conditions of his sins. "I have sinned against heaven and before you" (15:18). Scholars have doubted that there is real repentance on his part, especially because the technical words are absent in the text, with the exception of the declaration of his sins. It seems that the reward of the verb *hartazo* to be satiated to the fullest' induces him to act. Whatever the reasons may be, even if they escape us, the parable is still about discipleship and its costs. It is the salvation of a human being who was treated worse than an animal and the salvific act or restitution—the one who is humbled will be exalted.

The action of the prodigal son is positive: ἀναστὰς πορεύσομαι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου, Luke 15:18, "when getting up, I will go to my father" (emphasis mine). This seems to be the eschatological resurrection of this individual. A comment generally forgotten in the translation is useful here. The word *anastas* —get up—is in the participial aorist active form, denoting not a future action as a future desire to be completed but quite the

contrary. It seems that the prodigal after this divine moment of grace that touched him, allowed him to come back to his senses or to himself. The reading should be, *after* getting up, he states, “I will go.” This phrase is repeated again in verse 20, *καὶ ἀναστὰς ἦλθεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ* (Luke 15:20). Thus, the prodigal is inspired/converted before considering the rewards of his father’s house.

Some Conclusions

Ward invites us to consider, “From what place does theology speak how the cultures change? And what is the relationship between cultural transformation and religious practice such as the writing of theology?” (2005:16). It will be easier to leave those questions to missiologists and I do not pretend to have all the answers, however, as biblical and cultural critics, we should try to re-read our Bible in order to answer these questions from the perspective of our understanding of the early Christian church as we examine the NT. We cannot dissociate theological values and expressions of practices from the cultural times we live in. For this reason, the call for a reassessment of strategies and practices must demand our continual attention. Applications of theological principles and values which are obsolete and removed from our cultural time will not be effective in disciple-making. As Christians, though—*not of this world*—we are sent to transform people’s lives for a better world for today and tomorrow; so justice, equity, and Christian values must exemplify our daily walk with God.

If we are honest with our understanding of prophetic eschatological interpretation in the religious environment of the public square, we need to create more awareness and be more involved in defending and supporting the legislation of righteous causes. We must do as our former predecessors in Adventism did, who in their time fought for causes such as abolition, temperance, anti-US imperialism, and religious laws that separated church and state, such as Joseph Bates, (1792-1872); Alonzo T. Jones (1850-1923) and others like Desmond Doss (1919-2006). They were also committed to the ethics of non-violence and worked socially to organize and liberate people for a dignified life, such as demonstrated in the lives of missionaries to Peru, Ana and Fernando Stahl. Similarly, some of the latest Adventist voices advocating peacemaking, reconciliation, and the healing of the nations (<http://www.adventistpeace.org/>). These past and current Adventist voices have been and continue to raise their cries to a church—both leaders and members—that seems to be generally impassive to the call. For example, the curriculum for future pastors, the lack of effort to attract more majors to study political science, pre-law, and law, and the low

level of member participation in civic activities indicates little awareness of the need for involvement or a response to these voices. This apathetic attitude calls for a more interested politics of discipleship, in a *simplified church structure*, more like the early Christian congregation, which was guided by the charismata and the Spirit, and less institutionalized—well-organized but not highly structured or hierarchical—an organization that upholds the concept, “All questions welcome.”

In Acts 20:17-28 Paul states, “From the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring trials . . . I did not *draw back* from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house . . . for I did not draw back from declaring to you the whole purpose of God, You must shepherd the church of God which, He *purchased with His own blood*” or *the blood of his Only one*” (emphasis mine). The self-disinterested love shown in the cross was the motivation that led the early church to turn the world upside-down with the political message that the usurper king of the *oikumene* (inhabited world) was not Caesar with his temporal supremacy, but Jesus. In this manner, the faithful were not able to keep silent, (another translation of *hupostelō*), but they were subverting the decrees of the Empire by their adamant preaching of another king named Jesus, *Kurios* (Lord) and *Christos* (Messiah) who was available indiscriminately for everyone who wanted to believe, from every tribe, tongue, and people. The early Christians were God’s ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20) to a perishing world, offering hope, justice, and love, not only in the temporal dimension but also in the salvific dimension. Thus, as their descendants today, we must read the signs of our times and re-adjust our politics of discipleship.

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Rubén Muñoz-Larrondo joined the Religion faculty in 2006, teaching Greek, Hermeneutics and New Testament classes. In addition, he teaches masters level NT classes for the Hispanic track for the Andrews Theological Seminary and the Interamerican Adventist Theological Seminary, SETAI, PR. He holds a PhD from Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN. Prior to coming to Andrews University, Rubén taught for three years at a Historically Black College in Tennessee. As an ordained minister, he has served as a District Pastor for ten years in the Carolina and Kentucky-Tennessee Conferences.