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### Mission Priority/ Reforming Christians or Converting Non-Christians?

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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January 21, 2011

## Mission Priority: Reforming Christians or Converting Non-Christians?

By Gorden R. Doss (Department of World Mission, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)



As [Martin Luther](#), [John Calvin](#) and the other Protestant Reformers developed their theological positions they also developed deep missiological commitments. Millions of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists and others knew little or nothing about the Bible and had not accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The Reformers knew the history of Roman Catholic missionaries who had served over the centuries among non-Christian peoples. They quickly became convicted of their obligation to proclaim the Protestant way of being a Christian to non-Christian peoples. Therefore, they launched a systematic plan of global mission. They would not only work to reform the church from within but also to convert non-Christians to Jesus Christ.

### Historic Reality

Sadly, the real narrative is quite different from this wishful narrative. The Reformers focused almost exclusively on *missio interna* (internal mission, to reform Christians) and ignored *missio externa* (external mission, to convert non-Christians). The first significant Protestant mission to non-Christians was initiated by [Pietists](#) in the eighteenth-century. [Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf](#) (1700-1760) set the stage for [William Carey](#) (1761-1834) and others to launch what would be called the “Great Century” of Protestant mission—the nineteenth-century. From Luther’s nailing of the [95 Theses](#) in 1517, three centuries would pass before a strong Protestant missionary movement to non-Christians would be under way.

The church has to be converted and reconverted to God’s mission to humanity. Even the Apostles, themselves, had to be converted to God’s mission. Peter’s vision of the unclean animals and his subsequent baptism of Cornelius and family ([Acts 10](#)) was a pivotal point in the Holy Spirit’s work to convert the church to God’s whole mission. The Early Church took some time to widen its missional focus from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and then to all peoples everywhere as Jesus had instructed ([Acts 1:8](#)).

Protestants went through a similar process as the Early Church but it took much longer. One of the reasons was that they saw themselves as part of Christendom—a geographic-political-economic-religious zone in which everyone was assumed to be

Christian. The Protestant mission to Christendom was to reform its beliefs and practices. Outside of Christendom dwelt heathen savages who were welcome to move into Christendom and adopt its cultural-religious package. However, the drive to convert non-Christians within their native contexts was missing for a long time. Like Peter before his amazing vision, early Protestants had an incomplete conversion to God's mission, even though they were converted to Jesus.

### **What about Adventist Mission?**

Adventist history records a journey from the "Shut Door" theory into a steadily broadening focus on God's mission. By 1901, when we reorganized, we had a global focus. How well converted are today's Adventists to God's mission? To answer that we should consider the three main dimensions of Adventist mission. First, Adventists seek revival, reformation, and spiritual maturity within our church—our own *missio interna*. We find the mandate for this dimension in the message to Laodicea ([Rev 3:14-22](#)). Second, Adventists have a mission to share a reforming prophetic message with other Christians leading them to a fuller walk with Christ. This dimension might be called the Adventist *missio interna-externa*—mission inside Christianity but outside Adventism. Third, Adventists have an external mission to non-Christians—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others—the Adventist *missio externa*.

### **Priorities in Adventist Mission**

Is there an appropriate order of priority for the three dimensions of Adventist mission? Arguments can be and have been made that each of the three is most important. For the *missio interna* the argument is that unless things are right within the church the other two dimensions will fail. For the *missio interna-externa* the case for completing the unfinished Reformation within Christianity is made. For the *missio externa* the argument is that non-Christians are in the most dire need of the Gospel. Some Adventists have argued that the *missio interna* will take care of itself if the other dimensions are emphasized. "Just get members involved in evangelism and all of their problems will take care of themselves" is a statement I have heard. One prominent leader even expressed the view that "nurture" was not even a good word to use.

I believe that Christ's command of [Acts 1:8](#), the mission narrative of Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)), and the whole paradigm of mission in the Apostolic Church paint a picture in which the three dimensions of mission are overlapping, intertwined, mutually supportive, and equally important. There was nurturing instruction, fellowship, and prayer within the Apostolic church (*missio interna*); there was mission to Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism who worshipped God but were not Christians (*missio interna-externa*); and, there was mission to Gentiles who worshipped pagan deities (*missio externa*). My sense is that most Adventists support this balanced and integrated three-dimensional model of mission—at least theoretically.

Where do Adventists place their real priorities? Without a doubt, Adventists place the lowest priority on the *missio externa*—mission to non-Christians. Like other Christian groups, Adventists commit a small fraction of their human and material resources to mission among non-Christian peoples. What absorbs the great bulk of Adventist time, energy, and resources for mission is the *missio interna-externa*—evangelizing and reforming those inside Christianity but outside Adventism. In doing so, Adventists are repeating the mistake made by Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers by being more concerned with reforming Christians than converting non-Christians. Adventists may be more converted than were the Reformers to *missio externa* but that conversion is in our heads without being in our hands, feet, and pocket books. As for the Adventist *missio interna*, the evidence seems mixed. Adventists commit a major portion of available resources to a variety of ministries that serve church members. However, in my observation, we generally tend to provide weak nurture and discipling for new members.

The Adventist Church needs a fuller conversion to God's mission to non-Christian peoples that goes beyond its head to its hands, feet, and pocket book. Two powerful realities support this assertion: First, people who do not make the Bible their ultimate source of truth, who do not worship the Creator God alone, and who have not accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord are in the most dire need of the Gospel. Dr. G. T. Ng, newly elected General Conference Secretary, is famous for asking rhetorically, "What good is it to proclaim the second coming to people who don't yet know about the first coming?"

Second, non-Christian peoples comprise two-thirds of the world population. By working mostly to reform Christians,

Adventists have made an inadvertent choice to focus on just one-third of humanity. The Adventist membership has grown nicely but not where peoples in the most dire need of the Gospel are concentrated. The geographic areas where 75% of the least evangelized non-Christian peoples reside contain only 25% of the Adventist membership. Adventists work hardest in areas with 25% of the world population.

## Conclusion

These reflections about Adventist mission have many implications. I will share several and blog readers may have more to add. First, Adventists need to reflect deeply on our motivation for mission. Mission is not primarily about the blessings we receive from being involved but about God's desire that all will be saved. The blessings we receive should be seen as secondary derivative benefits of self-sacrificing service. Adventists need to rediscover self-sacrifice and prepare for the challenges of mission among non-Christians.

Second, if we are to be more effective among non-Christians we need to try new, creative methods. Our accustomed methods were developed in America for Christians and they are not necessarily the best for mission among Indian Hindus or Middle Eastern Muslims. The Adventist message, with its particular beliefs and practices, should not be equated with any particular method of sharing that wonderful message.

Third, Adventist mission needs to function strategically. The left and right hands need not only to know what the other is doing, but to work together harmoniously. Resources need to be allocated strategically. Coordination and collaboration will increase effectiveness.

There never have been as many people living at one time who have not heard the Gospel message as there are today. The time for revival, reformation, and full conversion to God's whole mission is upon us.




Gorden R. Doss is the grandson, son, and father of missionaries. He grew up in Malawi and worked there for sixteen years. Since 1998 he has taught mission at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He earned the DMin from Andrews University and the PhD Inter-Cultural Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Cheryl, his wife, is director of the Institute of World Mission.

Posted by [Angelika Kaiser](#) on January 21, 2011 in [Church and Society](#), [Church History](#), [Missions and Ministry](#) | [Permalink](#)

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