Response to Questions on C-5

By Jerald Whitehouse

In response to Carlos Martín’s article, Questions on C-5, I would like to note several areas of concern.

First, Martín has done a service in his article in focusing the discussion on several doctrinal points. This is helpful. If the issues involved in his discussion were only theological, one would be inclined to support his line of reasoning. However, the issues involve a broader range of considerations. Theological determinations made in a “sterile” environment are difficult to apply in the more “messy” environment of mission. In many cases they simply do not fit. I find Martín’s paper focusing only on theological determinations without relating to the missiological challenges and situational realities in the Muslim world. His paper seems to ignore the missional realities that must be included in the discussion if Adventist theology is to be biblically sound and at the same time “present truth” for the current mission challenge of the church in the Muslim world.

Second, although he appeals several times to a “high view of Scripture,” Martín fails to exemplify this in his paper. No biblical examples or models are provided to assist us in the discussion. Rather, appeals to the Church manual and other extra-biblical sources are made. While helpful in adding references to the discussion, this approach does not aid in the current debate to define more clearly a theology of mission based on sound biblical material. Perhaps we are to assume that the Church manual is accurately based on the Bible and applicable, therefore, in all contexts. I find this a dangerous direction of thought and actually counter to the basic Adventist understanding of progressive understanding of truth. Also, it is simply not reality in an in-

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creasingly diverse expression of Adventism around the world.

Before addressing specific points in the paper I would like to expand on the need for what Wilbert Shenk (2005:73-79) terms a “missional ecclesiology,” since I believe this is at the core of the discussion and concerns raised in Martín’s paper.

Alan Kreider, in responding to David Bosch’s categorization of the history of Christian mission, notes three periods of Christian mission history. The first period he terms “pre-Christendom.” It was characterized by focus on the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians saw themselves as pilgrims, resident aliens, in the world but not of the world. Their worship was simple, interactive, and focused on equipping Christians to live attractive lives. Mission was their identity. The transition to the second period of mission, the “Christendom” period, Kreider calls “Christendom Shift.” With Constantine, the Christian church’s power focus gradually shifted from the Holy Spirit to the State, even though the Holy Spirit continued to be active. Compulsion became a way of enforcing orthodoxy. Rather than pilgrims or resident aliens, Christians became residents in this world. Their worship turned to dramatic liturgy in imposing buildings. Rather than mission, maintenance became the stance of the church. As Kreider notes (2005:66): “The Christendom shift altered the focus of the church from mission to maintenance, except on the fringes of the ‘Christian’ territories.”

Kreider then describes the third historical paradigm of mission as “post-Christendom.” This third period emerged in the mission movements of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and continues until today. Those in tune with this “post-Christendom” shift are more likely to identify with the pre-Christendom paradigm than with that of Christendom. For a more detailed discussion see the entire article (2005:59-68).

In many ways, the history of the Seventh-day Adventist movement has followed a similar three-paradigm model, albeit not quite so neatly as Kreider describes. We began our history as a “pre-Christendom” movement. Mission was integral to the identity and activity of the early
Adventist believers, even though it took several years and some convincing to move internationally. However, as the church grew, there has been a tendency to succumb to “Christendom” dynamics, where maintenance of orthodoxy and the preservation of identity, rather than mission, are primary. The struggle in which the church is engaged today is between making mission primary or maintaining unity in belief—orthodoxy.

I find Martin’s paper succumbing to the “orthodoxy only” focus of “Christendom,” while ignoring the mission identity and focus characteristic of the “pre-Christendom” and “post-Christendom” eras.

A search for biblical models for a “post-Christendom” ecclesiology would find the book of Acts most helpful. Shenk (2005:74) summarizes in the following quote the work of Paul Minear and John Driver who have provided helpful insights into the nature of the church in the book of Acts.

These studies yield two observations. First, the church as the people of God is ‘set apart’ because of its special vocation on behalf of all other peoples. There are no people to whom it is not responsible to witness concerning God’s saving purpose; the scope of its responsibility is the whole world. Second, the form of the church is not at issue. No primal form is prescribed that is to be introduced worldwide. Indeed, it can be said that the church is infinitely translatable or adaptable. The church can be established in every language and culture, taking the form that is appropriate to each particular cultural-linguistic group.

Shenk (75) further notes that “without mission the church dies. Although what we ordinarily call the church may continue to exist as a religious group, a missionless church is no longer an authentic church. The proof is if its missionary character will be demonstrated by its response to the world.”

Shenk (79) is attempting to define a “missional ecclesiology” based on biblical models and Christian history. He argues that the ecclesiology that has been inherited from Christendom has been marked by a twofold distortion.

(1) Christendom ecclesiology is nonmissional, and (2) it has been regarded as perfectly normative. I have contended that the New Testament leaves no doubt as to the fundamental purpose of the church but does not prescribe the polity or form of the church. As the primitive church began spreading around the Mediterranean basin and into Asia, issues arose as to theology, ethics, and missionary engagement. Paul forged his theology in the thick of missionary witness. In his epistles to these new churches, the apostle grapples with the issues being raised in the context of Christian expansion into new cultures. At no point does he address the problem of structure and form. Rather, he focuses on matters of Christian commitment and discipleship.

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the thick of missionary witness.” Only thus will we be successful in developing a “missional ecclesiology” that will see this Adventist movement through to the coming of Jesus.

In his paper “Doing Theology in Mission,” Jon Dybdahl (2005:2) also emphasizes the point we are trying to clarify. “Mission and theology should go together. . . . True theology should move us to mission, and mission rightly practiced should lead to theology.” In his footnote to this quote, Dybdahl writes: “Note the words of Philip Clayton: ‘The “logic” of missiology is ing without cultural baggage. A theological consciousness would move to the understanding that I, as the student of Scripture, realize that the way I look at Scripture is affected by my background, language, nationality, and history (culture). At this level of consciousness, however, I assume that the person I am discipling has a culture similar to mine. The fifth level of consciousness Dybdahl describes, is a missiological consciousness. Here I, as the “teacher,” realize that not only is my view of revelation affected by my culture, but the person I am discipling is also

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central for the doctrine of the church. Bosch, Shenk, Kirk, and Haldeman have all argued that church and mission, ecclesiology, and missiology are inseparable.” Dybdahl then discusses phases of development in worldview or consciousness that underlie the understanding of mission in relation to theology. First, a self consciousness. Second, an other consciousness. Third, a historical consciousness. In this consciousness, the Bible is seen as having a historical context, but the persons involved in Bible study (teacher and student) understand themselves as being without cultural baggage. A theological consciousness would move to the understanding that I, as the student of Scripture, realize that the way I look at Scripture is affected by my background, language, nationality, and history (culture). At this level of consciousness, however, I assume that the person I am discipling has a culture similar to mine. The fifth level of consciousness Dybdahl describes, is a missiological consciousness. Here I, as the “teacher,” realize that not only is my view of revelation affected by my culture, but the person I am discipling is also

affected by his or her culture. At each level the Bible maintains its authority; the issue is how we approach Scripture and how we relate to other cultures in the discipling process. Dybdahl goes on to explain the implications of a missiological consciousness to the mission and identity of the Church (2005:7-10).

All this is background to the discussion of specific points raised in Martín’s paper. It is important to understand that the nature of the debate within the church has shifted. The discussion is now taking place in the context of active mission.
to peoples of “non-Christian” background. The old paradigm of a “Christendom” ecclesiology simply will not fit. A “theological consciousness” alone is not sufficient. We must move to a new paradigm which Shenk calls a “missional ecclesiology,” or, as Dybdahl refers to it, a “missiological consciousness.”

Now to the specific points raised in Martín’s paper. First, a few points of accuracy of the information. In describing the C-1 to C-6 “Scale” he uses the term “inside” language and “outside” language as referring to a totally foreign language in C-1 and a local language in C-2, 3, and 4. He fails to differentiate between Christian “inside” language and forms and Muslim “inside” language and forms. In C-3 the “inside” language would be idiomatically Christian and Christian forms would be used. In contrast, in C-4 the “inside” language would be idiomatically Muslim and biblically permissible Islamic forms would be used. In his description of C-5 he rightly notes that the main difference is that the people retain a Muslim identity. However, he goes on to assert that they continue to believe that the Qur’an is inspired and still consider Muhammad as a true prophet. He gives no source for this assertion, repeats it several times in the paper, and notes that “this is a downward path to syncretism.”

In contrast to Martín’s assertion, the result of Lepke’s (2001) doctoral research would indicate that believers in the C-5 movement, on which he focused, do have a clear understanding of the inspiration of the Bible as the source of authority. This is a gradual growth in understanding over time.

Martín expresses concern that the believers in Jesus in the Muslim context are becoming “Christians” without knowing or understanding what is happening, and furthermore, that they do not have any knowledge of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. On the surface this would seem to be a valid concern. However, Martín seems to completely ignore the issue of meanings of words, and assumes the word “Christian” has the same meaning in the Muslim context as it does in his context. When one understands all that “Christianity” has come to symbolize in the Muslim context it becomes clear that calling oneself a “Christian” (without explaining what is meant) in that setting is inaccurate, misleading, and destructive of biblical mission. It is therefore superficial to evaluate an FDIC ministry by the titles it uses without reference to the actual beliefs of the members of the ministry. It would seem more important to ensure that the faith understanding be biblically sound than simply requiring the “correct” title. Regarding the faith understanding, as noted above, Martín gives no evidence of having carefully looked at the faith understanding of any of the FDIC ministries. Rather, he makes as-
sertions without indicating his sources. An example of this is his direct statement: “The fact is that in order to live within the community of Islam, both legally and socially, an Adventist Muslim must accept Mohammad as a prophet, the Qur’an as an inspired book, and Islam as a true religion. This is a downward path to syncretism.” No source is given for this assertion, as if it is to be accepted as common knowledge. Later in his paper he again notes: “Muslim background believers maintain that Islam is a true religion, that Mohammad was a true prophet, and that the Qur’an is an inspired book but that at some point Muslims misunderstood them.”

Certain aspects of the role of Muhammad and the Qur’an must be reinterpreted. This will perhaps be the most challenging task of C5; to not do so will in time cause these believers to move toward C4 (contextualized, yet not Muslim) or C6 (underground/silent believers).

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Again, he gives no source for the statement of supposed fact. The reality would give a different picture. I quote from Travis (1998:413-414):

Can individuals be a part of the community of Islam and not affirm standard Muslim theology? Yes, so long as they remain silent about their unorthodox beliefs. Indeed, there are millions of “cultural Muslims” who have divergent beliefs or know virtually nothing about Islam, yet who, because of birth and the fact that they have not formally left the fold, are seen as a part of the community of Islam. However, the goal of C5 believers (unlike C6 believers) is not to remain silent about their faith, but rather to be a witness for Christ. As they share, eventually the issue of the prophethood of Muhammad and the inerrancy of the Qur’an will arise. A follower of Jesus cannot affirm all that is commonly taught about the Qur’an and Muhammad.

There is also a basic flaw in Martín’s use of the C-1 to C-6 “scale,” which is, in fact, not so much a scale (of increasing contextualization) as a description of types of contextualization or of the cultural group within which the particular believer group is contextualizing (Travis 1998:407). The C-4 believer group is contextualizing to a similar degree as the C-5, but
to two reference groups: Christian and Muslim. It is trying to straddle both worlds to a degree. C-5, however, is incarnating the gospel into one reference group, the Muslim people group. As Travis points out, one of the difficulties of the C-4 groups is that they are attempting to straddle two identities and therefore often succumb to the pressures of the Christian reference group and end up with the typical “extraction,” totally out of the Muslim context (Travis 1998:408). This leaves no sustainable remnant witness within the Muslim community. This outcome is counterproductive to completing the mission task of the church.

The “contextualization spectrum” that Martín refers to and which Parshall describes (1998:404-405), suffers from this understanding of the “C” definitions as a “scale.” To say that syncretism only occurs as one moves into C-5 types of believer groups is to fail to realize that syncretism is possible and, in fact, does occur, with any of the “C” definitions. Concern for syncretism must be equally applied in contextualization to local “Christian” forms and identities as well as to Muslim forms and identities. The evil one has infiltrated all faith systems and syncretism must be guarded against no matter what the contextual reference group.

Martin seems more concerned about what believers should not believe in than what they should believe in. It is true that we never ask the new Muslim believer in Jesus to publicly declare whether the Qur’an is inspired or not, or whether Muhammad is a true prophet or not, and we encourage continued use of the Qur’an within their context so that they can in turn disciple new believ-
tion rests on the Bible and the revelation of God in Jesus’ life and death, including his divinity. We focus on solid biblical teaching, including teaching them how to study the Bible. It is this continued biblical teaching that will instill a self-corrective element into their spiritual growth and understanding, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this way faith in Jesus and the Bible is theirs and takes firm root in the local understanding and practice. Further, I am not aware that baptismal vows used by any Adventist evangelist require a statement of “unfaith” in addition to a statement of faith. If a Catholic affirms his faith in Jesus for salvation and in the Bible as the authority in his life over the traditions of men, do we require a statement of “unfaith” in the Pope and the Catholic Church? It would be well to look at the baptismal vows used in the C-5 movements, in whose development we have played a role, and to look at the series of study guides being most widely used in these ministries; however, Martín’s paper makes no reference to either.

Martin points out that we use the term “all the Holy Books” in reference to the Torah, Zaboor, Injil (generally understood to be the Bible), and the Qur’an. This is used as a matter of respect as we work with Muslims, to begin with them on ground that is familiar and then lead them to the Bible as the source of faith. Our evangelists learned years ago to address the apostles as Saint Matthew, Saint Peter, etc., in deference to the Catholic understanding. Do we believe in saints as the Catholic Church does? No. Are we making a theological statement when we do this out of respect for the Catholic person we are discipling? No. The same would be true in using certain ways of speaking with the Muslim.

Another area of concern for Martín is the understanding of the remnant. Martin quotes a paper I wrote to report on a particular Faith Development in Context ministry at the Muslim Studies Conference at Newbold College in 1992. It was later printed in Spectrum. This was at the very early stages of our work with this kind of ministry. We have learned much since that time. As one pursues new and experimental initiatives which has been the mandate for the Global Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations (GCAMR), one must be open to serious evaluation and learning as one progresses. Our thinking on this issue has clarified as we have progressed. We are not engaged in encouraging a multiplicity of remnants: there is one remnant. The question would seem to center more on the nature of that remnant, where they are located, and what their identity is. Jon Paulien has shared regarding a recent discussion of this in the Biblical Research Institute Committee (BRICOM) in response to a paper that took the position that God’s last-day remnant is
made up only of those openly identified with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The consensus response, however, was different. The subsequent discussion developed the understanding that biblically there have been three types of remnant people. After citing several Biblical examples (Old and New Testament) Paulien (2005) notes the following “end-time” example from Revelation:

- God’s final gathering (Rev 10-17)
- Historical remnant = 1844
- Faithful remnant = those faithful to God today
- Eschatological remnant = gathering from all faiths and all nations

The big advance at the BRI-COM meeting was applying this 3-fold concept of remnant to the New Testament and Revelation. If you ask the question, Is the SDA church the Remnant? You have to answer yes and no. There’s a sense that it is so as a historical datum (commandments, testimony of Jesus, etc.) but it is not limited to SDA in the ultimate sense (worldwide focus and message). The final remnant is much bigger than SDA. Seeing the multiple definitions allowed the group to affirm our historical role in Revelation without denying that God is gathering a larger remnant of which we are only a part.

The recent Mission Issues Committee discussed the issue of the church’s relation with FDIC ministries. Admittedly, Martín feels that the Mission Issues Committee has not done its work carefully enough and has allowed loopholes, which threaten to compromise orthodoxy.” It seems to me that the difference between Martín’s concern and the guideline recommendations, carefully crafted by the Mission Issues Committee, may lie in focus. It might be helpful to note the process of editing and approval of the recommendations from the Mission Issues Committee. The Director of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) is responsible for the final editing and the recommendations have then been approved by the General Conference Administrative Committee (GC ADCOM). Martín seems only concerned about doctrinal preservation, whereas the Mission Issues Committee, while seriously concerned about preserving doctrinal unity and integrity, is equally concerned about how the essential salvific message of the Bible can be effectively communicated and established within local contexts among people groups within which we, until now, have had no success in establishing an end-time witness. To those concerned only about orthodoxy, the wording may appear as a window to syncretism, whereas to those equally concerned about mission they are carefully worded guidelines that allow us to craft a spiritual growth process that may appear as incomplete at any one point, but that is on a trajectory to complete understanding of biblical truth in the group being discipled.
In his discussion of preparation for baptism, Martín raises the question of what is “core” and what is “fringe.” This is an unfortunate dichotomy which none of us would be comfortable with. “Fringe” implies “a marginal, peripheral, or secondary part” (Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary). It would seem reasonable to admit that some doctrines are more central (core?) than others, but to marginalize those “others” as “fringe” seems irresponsible. In any process of discipling seekers for truth, a progression of understanding is followed, a sequence of discussion is followed. Foundational concepts must be covered before other more difficult concepts are approached. This process will differ for different peoples because of the varying backgrounds, presuppositions, and beliefs which they bring to the table. Also, certain understandings will be more difficult to grasp for a certain group than for others from a differing background. It will take much longer for certain understandings to be clarified and take root. To assert that, because at any one point the understanding is not “complete,” those involved in the ministry are marginalizing some beliefs as “fringe” reflects a superficial understanding of the issues.

Martín notes that he sees no problem in meeting Muslims where they are. However, he goes on to assert that “the option to become Muslim Adventists (C5) falls within the realm of syncretism. He then quotes Travis (413) to say, “Christians becoming Muslims to reach Muslims (i.e., C-5 missionaries) is a step beyond simply urging new believers to remain in the religious community of their birth.”

This is a curious use of this quotation, since Travis is clearly addressing the issue of whether persons of Christian background...
should become Muslim to be missionaries to Islam (C-5 missionaries). Neither Travis nor Adventists have advised a person of Christian background to assume Muslim identity to work for Muslims. But Travis goes on to note:

Yet I could imagine that in some instances God may call uniquely gifted, well-prepared individuals, whose ministries are firmly backed by prayer, to C5 outreach and religious identity. These C5 missionaries would be Muslims in the literal Arabic sense of the word (i.e. ‘one submitted to God’) and their theology would, of course, differ from standard Muslim theology at a number of key points. They would have to be ready for persecution, and it would be best if these believers were of Muslim background.

In conclusion, I would appeal to all that engage in this discussion to verify sources of information for accuracy and dependability. There is simply too much misinformation being circulated as fact. Further, all should be aware of the missiological as well as the theological issues. All who seek to guide the church in this important mission should provide biblical models for consideration and should speak to those involved in these ministries rather than rely on disgruntled critics. I am thankful that the church is wrestling with these issues. As a result, doors of opportunity are opening in our relations with Muslims. We all should pray for the guidance of God’s Spirit in these matters.

Works Cited


