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## Adventist Mission Theology: Developing a Biblical Foundation

The Adventist movement grew out of the fervor that swept across America during the Second Great Awakening. The nation was still young, having become the first of the British colonies to fight for and win its freedom from the colonial power, yet having many ties to Britain religiously and culturally. The First Great Awakening had made the United States into a much more Christian nation, which brought about great religious change (Hudson and Corrigan 1992:185) in North America, including sweeping religious renewal promoted by preachers and reformers across New England and other parts of the inhabited New World (Walters 1997:1, 46, 47).

The most fruitful soil for reform and renewal movements in North America was Upstate New York, which after successive movements being birthed and sweeping across the area, became known as “the burned-over district” (Cross 1950; Walters 1997:23; Butler 1990:282). Religious movements in the United States which arose during this time included Latter-day Saints (Butler 1990:282), Christian Science (Butler 1990:234), Spiritualists (Butler 1990:234), Shakers (Butler 1990:223; Hatch 1991:65), and the Oneida community (Butler 1990:282; Hatch 1991:65; Walters 1997:55, 56).

Reform movements were also on the rise including ones that emphasized anti-slavery, health reform, women’s suffrage, political reform, educational reform, creative communal living, and religious life as seen among the Shaker, Oneida, and Amana communities (Walters 1997:41-44; Hatch 1991:65). While the communal societies urged a utopian lifestyle (Walters 1997:40), the reform movements encouraged progress in society at large (Morgan 2001:26, 27).

People gathered in public halls and spent days camping to hear and often respond to charismatic preaching where hundreds and sometimes thousands assembled, creating revivals in many parts of the United States (Butler 1990:221; Hatch 1991:49, 52). These revival campmeetings were

fodder for many strands of early charismatic renewal movements and eventually helped establish many methods of evangelism, some of which are still seen today (Walters 1997:26, 27; Hatch 1991:153). Some of those involved in these movements were holiness preachers of the Wesleyan heritage (153).

As the last great preacher of the Second Great Awakening, William Miller brought fresh eschatological insight to the renewal sweeping the land (Hatch 1991:142, 145). As a result of Miller's preaching and other messengers promoting spiritual reformation, a deep spiritual desire gave rise to utopian societies and reform movements, promoting a brand of perfectionism and a strong belief in progress in the fledgling United States (Morgan 2001:26-32).

The Second Great Awakening diminished after the Great Disappointment of 1844; however, a renewed study born out of a prophetic hermeneutic kept the Second Advent hope burning that resulted in the founding and early growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Damsteegt 1977:16-21; Knight 1993:35-39). When the young nation was developing its sense of manifest destiny, Adventists developed an identity of a remnant people with a message to tell to the world (Damsteegt 1977:243, 244). However, it is also true that early Adventist theological heritage included influence from key strands from the movements that were wide-spread in early America.

This historical milieu influenced the formation of the early mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which while definitely focused on the second coming of Christ also contained an element of helping people in the here and now through education and health reform. The work of some of the early American reformers was focused on ridding America of evils in order to prepare people for the Second Coming of Christ (Butler 1990:286); this kept the eschatological hope rooted in this world while preparing for the next.

During the early American religious experience theology was diverse, as various components of reformation theology impacted American religious life. Three theological strands played a significant role in the development of the Adventist movement. In his magnum opus *Transforming Mission*, the late David Bosch discusses three parts of Protestant mission theological heritage, namely those arising from Puritan, Anabaptist, and Pietist backgrounds. Bosch does not mention Adventists in his discussion, but this paper applies Bosch's theory to the development of a Seventh-day Adventist theology of mission, since it too grew, at least in part, out of those elements present in the religious revivals of the 1800s.

Adventist theological strands of Puritan origin are well documented (Damsteegt 1977:259; Ball 1981), and Bosch's discussion of origins of mis-

sion theology arouses an interest in the theological heritage Adventists share from both the Pietist and Anabaptist movements. Below I rely on Bosch in his discussion of the contributions of these three key movements specifically to mission theology (Bosch 1991:239-261) in order to identify key elements in the development of Adventist mission theology.

Reformation theology provided several significant foundations central to Seventh-day Adventist beliefs including the sinful nature of man (Bosch 1991:241), the centrality of justification by faith (241), the individual nature of salvation (241) as opposed to the salvation of groups or families, the centrality of the Scriptures (242); and the basis for the priesthood of all believers (242).

Although the concept of the priesthood of all believers was developed to a greater degree through the Anabaptist tradition, Adventist theology benefitted from this inheritance in at least two ways. First, that believers not trained in theological disciplines could read the Bible and understand its meaning (Damsteegt 1977:16-21; Knight 1993:36-41). Second, that all were called to preach the gospel to prepare others for the Second Coming of Christ (Damsteegt 1977:243). For Anabaptists the priesthood of all believers meant there was no parish and no boundaries (Bosch 1991:242) and that the great commission was to all believers no matter where they lived.

Similar to the colonial concept of church and state that brought about cooperation between mission outposts and colonial governments, early American Puritan thought did not often differentiate between church and state (Bosch 1991:240). This created an important difference between Puritan thought and the emergence of Adventist missions. While Martin Luther only hinted at separation (245), Anabaptists insisted on absolute separation between church and state (246), "church and state could under no circumstances whatsoever cooperate in mission" (246).

For both the reform movement and the Anabaptist movement there was an apocalyptic expectation. According to Bosch, Luther expected the world to end in 1558, which led to an underdeveloped missionary theology (Bosch 1991:246). On the other hand Anabaptists also had eschatological views, but these views motivated mission (247). Adventists mission was apocalyptic and similar to the Anabaptist view in that the second coming of Christ was a primary motivation for mission.

Some reformers did see a need for complete separation from the Catholic Church, but the Anabaptists considered both Catholic and Protestant church leaders as pagan and apostate (Bosch 1991: 247) and who had brought into Christianity false religion. Adventists believed in the corruption of both Catholics and Protestants (Cross 1950:320; Damsteegt 1977:46, 47). The Anabaptist belief that the other churches were false led them to the conclusion that Europe was a mission field (Bosch 1991:247), which

also became the first mission post of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000:141). The early Adventist mission was to share the impending judgment with Christians; their witness was to apostate Catholics and Protestants (Damsteegt 1977:46, 47).

Pietism focused on a personal and subjective relationship with Christ brought about through repentance and conversion with a continued emphasis on sanctification, separating the individual from the need for ecclesiastical authority (Bosch 1991:253). It was Pietism, which helped influence the revivalist campmeeting preaching, and the holiness movement (Butler 1990:221; Hatch 1991:153; Cross 1950:241, 304). The influence of the Wesleyan movement on the pietistic spirituality of Adventist believers set up an internal drive for personal spirituality, as is evidenced in the writings of Ellen White. Additionally there was recognition among Pietists for planting churches even where the official church was already established (Bosch 1991:253).

In the tumultuous times of the Second Great Awakening in the United States the Adventist Church was influenced by each of the strands of evangelical faith, but did so with a fervent eschatological expectation. With eschatology as the framework, Adventists developed a unique theological and practical mosaic which continues to influence the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to this day. While the theological mosaic was largely eschatological, in the early years it remained holistic through efforts to encourage practical life change.

The religious fundamentals of the Puritans, the priesthood of all believers of the Anabaptists, and the subjective heart elements of the spiritual life valued by the Pietists are all important dimensions of a holistic Adventist mission theology. These strands also aid in understanding the variety of expression found in Adventist mission today.

### **Adventist Mission Activity**

The Adventist Church is undergoing rapid growth; as of 2007 it was approaching 16 million members (Krause 2008:13). During the 2008 Council on Evangelism and Witness Pardon Mwansa presented a paper entitled "Rapid Growth: Facts and Challenges" identifying some of the potential consequences of rapid growth (Mwansa 2008). Some of the consequences included fostering of splinter groups, diluting of Adventist beliefs, and the adoption of non-Christian forms and customs (Mwansa 2008:6, 7).

In order to understand the need for a holistic theology of mission, I want to briefly examine various types of Adventist mission activity. With a wide variety of church sponsored and supporting ministry activities, examining the types of mission practices leads one to believe that Adventists are mission motivated people. A look at the current variety of mis-

sion practices within the Adventist Church reveals an incredibly complex picture of mission activity.

**Proclamation:** There has been a surge over the past few years of short-term evangelistic efforts. One of the key incentives promoted is the re-energizing of the church by sending an evangelist and an encouragement that evangelism can be done by non-professionals (ShareHim). Adventist Laymen's Services and Industries (ASI) and ShareHim have both developed lay-based evangelistic materials that have been translated into several languages and that use computer graphics that have been adapted for major ethnic groups internationally. (ShareHim, Adventist Laymen's Services and Industries, The Quiet Hour).

Short-term evangelistic mission trips usually include minimal adaptation of the message in either style or subject matter. The focus in this approach to witness is the draw of the foreign speaker and the use of technology in delivering a prophecy oriented or doctrinal messages that often concludes with a baptismal service for those who responded to the message. At times this type of outreach includes other dimensions of a more holistic outreach, such as a medical clinic or health class to minister to the needs of people.

**Institutional Development:** Historically the hallmark of Seventh-day Adventist missions has been in developing publishing houses (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000:142; Maxwell 2002:171), medical facilities (Pfeifer 1981:52), educational institutions (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000:198), and church administrative offices. Institutions often impact Adventist mission in one of several key areas: (1) to maintain the church organization; (2) to provide future leaders through training; (3) to be a missionary presence by helping or educating people; and (4) to administrate the proclamation of the gospel within a given territory.

**Church Planting in Context:** Since 1990 an indigenous church planting culture has developed in the Adventist Church. The Global Mission Initiative strategy has three main components: (1) to preach to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people; (2) to begin from where the work is easiest to where it is most difficult; and (3) to move from reaching mainly Christian populations to reaching non-Christian populations (Krause 2008:3). Global Mission focuses church planting efforts on training and sending local church planters to areas where there has been no church.

The Global Mission approach has included the recruiting, training, and sending of church planters areas similar to their own cultural context. Recently there has been a renewed emphasis on reaching out to the difficult to reach groups and a focus on the 10/40 Window and urban church planting (General Conference). Several Adventist supporting ministries are involved in similar types of church planting initiatives.

**Contextualized Ministry:** A number of ministries exist which are attempting to develop a contextual Adventist witness. These ministries display a deep commitment to understanding non-superficial elements of local culture and developing the means of impacting people groups with the gospel at a worldview level. Included are the Global Mission Religious Study Centers and the ministries that relate to them. Several supporting ministries are committed to contextualized ministry including Adventist Frontier Missions, work sponsored through Gospel Outreach, The Quiet Hour, and several local outreach ministries.

The Global Mission Religious Study Centers “help Adventists understand the beliefs and cultures of other world religions and equip them with means, approaches, methods, and models on how best to witness to people of non-Christian affiliations” (General Conference). Adventist Frontier Missions requires each missionary family to complete a long-term cultural scrapbook to begin understanding levels of culture that would otherwise remain hidden and impede the witness of the missionaries (Adventist Frontier Missions).

**Development:** Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and its predecessors have focused on development in areas of the world which are economically disadvantaged or have been affected by disasters. ADRA operates six main portfolios which include protecting the vulnerable, supporting families, promoting health, providing food and water, establishing livelihoods, and responding to emergencies (Adventist Development and Relief Agency).

**Interfaith Dialogue:** Until recently interfaith dialogue was a relatively unknown element of Adventist mission. Three main venues for interfaith dialogue are include global interfaith dialogue conferences where various world religions are present to interact with others, national and regional dialogue where at least two religious perspectives are shared between world religious bodies, and in local settings where an Adventist congregation engages in a relationship at a local mosque, temple, or church, sometimes resulting in cooperation in local community issues such as health promotion, property disputes, and community development.

Within the last few years Adventists have engaged in each of the above types of interfaith dialogue. With the 2007 appointment of William Johnson as liaison for interfaith issues, the General Conference took a step toward engaging other world religious bodies. This official step comes in addition to several Adventist scholars engaging in dialogue directly with other faith bodies in both international and regional settings. These include conferences in Doha, Qatar; Mindanao State University, Philippines; and various dialogues in North America and Australia. In 2008 Walla Walla University hosted a conference on Adventist perspectives of interfaith dialogue (Krause 2009:16).

Some activities not included in the above categories in which ministries serve to develop infrastructure for the church's mission include aviation services, media ministries, printing, church building mission projects, etc. Not including these ministries in the above categories does not understate their importance, rather it sees their importance within each specific ministry which typically does not engage in direct outreach, but rather provides important infrastructure support to the mission of the church.

The various types of outreach discussed above includes a wide range of activities and at a glance might be thought of as holistic, when in fact some of the ministries do not interact in the field. For example, since ADRA accepts government funding for development projects, church planting and proclamation are excluded from their portfolios. Thus ADRA, the ministry which does so much for the daily needs of people, is also the most distant from being able to share biblical truth. Ministries tend toward specialization in one area, which limits their wider impact; compartmentalization becomes a challenge in mission. Several ministries involved in church planting in context give the best chance at holistic Adventist mission presence due to having a church planter live and do ministry in day to day life with people, but more study needs to be done to measure the impact of sharing the gospel within the context of the local culture.

### **The Need for an Adventist Theology of Mission**

A few observations need to be made regarding the great variety of mission praxis. First, Adventists are overall a mission driven people. Second, though a great deal of variety in Adventist mission activity exists, not all mission activity works in unity. Third, the great variety of mission activity suggests that there is a need for further development of missiological thought which can serve as a foundation for holistic witness. While mission practice continues to be fueled by both official church structures and supporting ministries, there remains a need for mission theological development to provide an adequate foundation for mission.

Adventists have been eschatologically driven in mission (Damsteegt 1977). This grounding continues to be reaffirmed today (Knight 2009; Rodriguez 2009) and is a significant part of Adventist mission as found in Matthew 24:15, 28:18-20, and Revelation 14:6-12. Adventist mission must include eschatology as an important and future looking component of mission theology. In order for Adventist theology of mission to be balanced, other parts of salvation history should be included to provide Adventists a stronger, broader, and more holistic foundation for mission.

A possible structure for mission could be grounded in the major biblical epochs that are part of salvation history. The following can be considered as seven biblical points of contact for a biblical theology of mission.

1. Prehistory, Creation, and the Fall of Adam and Eve. In the stories of Genesis 1-9 the Bible records stories of creation, judgment, covenant, law, family, sin—all significant in Adventist beliefs. Adventists have a rich cosmic perspective that includes how things came to be, and how the sin problem began. The biblical narrative provides the framework for the great controversy. This era gives mission theology a starting point that is grounded in cosmic history, the importance of creation, the fall of man, and worship of God.

2. Patriarchal Period. This era includes the call of Abram, the establishment of a new nation, the Sanctuary, and the Ten Commandments. During this epoch, Israel becomes a nation through promise, protection, and the guidance of God. The sanctuary recapitulates the tragedy of the fall; the sanctuary also demonstrates the future ministry of Christ from his life until the Second Coming. God's relationship with mankind is demonstrated in this story: covenant, law, worship, ministry, and God's plan for the nations. In this epoch mission theology is reflected in salvation, protection, redemption, and the prophetic future of the Messiah.

3. History of Kings and the Captivity. This period covers both the brightest and the darkest hours of God's people in the nation of Israel. The fall of Israel and Judah into apostasy follows the golden era of the early monarchy, revealing a nation in opposition to God. We see God teaching faithfulness in trial during this time through the lives of Daniel, Elijah, Elisha, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the remnant. Significant mission themes are a call to return to a true worship of God, a call to repentance, and themes of social justice.

4. The Birth and Life of Jesus. The awesome theological and missiological declaration of the incarnation cannot be missed when it is declared "Immanuel, God with us." From this intersection of theology, life, and ministry comes the plan of Salvation. The life of Jesus serves as an example of compassion, giving liberty, and touching downcast humanity with the kiss of grace. Missiological themes are reiterated in the birth and life of Christ; a teaching ministry, discipleship, a mission of incarnation as the ground for contextualization, mission from weakness rather than strength, compassion, repentance, and powerful teachings regarding the kingdom of God.

5. The Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. The drama of the ages draws to a climax when Christ, the God-Man, dies a criminal's death. Fortunately the story does not end with death but with new life. The meaning of these stories for salvation, forgiveness, substitutionary atonement, demonstrations of the righteousness of God, and the defeat of evil and his hosts are magnanimous. So much is wrapped up in the



Friday of “It is finished” and the Sunday “He is risen.” There is no better proclamation in the world than to worship God through word and act for his magnificent sacrifice. This defines all worship, daily living, stewardship, and devotion; forevermore these aspects of life will be transformed by Christ’s amazing sacrifice.

6. The Holy Spirit and the Early Church. The power of the Holy Spirit and the *koinonia* of the early church still define the church’s witness and unity today. The bold and illegal witness of the early church has inspired mission activity to move beyond what is safe. The church is the community of the risen Lord, and the unity of the Spirit through service, godly living, sacrifice, mutual support, growth in suffering, and the witness of power. The apostolic witness to the gentiles and the creation of the new Israel of faith, i.e. the kingdom of God in practice, are key ingredients in a theology of mission. Key components of witness today include the concept of the priesthood of all believers and spiritual gifts.

7. The *Parousia*—William Miller Had It Right—Jesus Is Coming Soon! We must proclaim the nearness of his coming until the world gets the message. The theological reformation that Adventist believers were part of in the 1800s has produced some strange offspring; but make no mistake—nearly all Christians (even Roman Catholics) now speak and write regarding the Second Advent. The *eschaton* is the glorious conclusion to the missiological enterprise; it is as if missions is eschatology with feet, working toward the ultimate conclusion of redemptive history. The kingdom, now and not yet, is finally realized in glory; the King comes to reign, the rest of eternity is now in focus.

The biblical foundations afforded when these periods of salvation history are taken together allow for a deep theology, a constructive view of redemptive history, a profound missiology, and a celebratory ecclesiology. This can be done without leaving behind biblical beliefs and heritage that Adventists value. A salvation history approach which focuses on the biblical message has potential to bring into theology many necessary components of faith, allowing for a biblical witness that is both holistic and missional.

Taking the biblical narrative as an account of the acts of God reveals a God who is deeply relational. A God of covenants, protection, liberation, promise, judgment, grace, and creative order beautifully demonstrated through scriptural narratives. I would concur with John Piper who suggests that the key issue in the biblical narrative is one of worship and that all other subjects point us to expanding the kingdom whose people worship the Creator (Piper 2003:17).

From the tested allegiance in creation, to the moral law and sanctuary, to the lostness of the exile, to those who worship the new born Jesus,

to Paul giving explicit instructions on conduct, all the way to the lamb on the throne of Revelation—the unifying themes of these epochs and all of Scripture is the worship of God. Worship happens in response to his mighty acts, it happens in personal and corporate repentance, it happens in response to liberation and healing, and it happens in response to the judgment.

Worship of God is what witnessing, discipleship, service, stewardship, and salvation are all about. It follows that every component of daily life can be an event of worship to God, and Sabbath can be a celebration and culmination of the worship of God. Our worship can flow from counting and recounting God’s mighty acts and presence in the “every-day” activities of life as they are experienced throughout the course of the week.

### **Significance for Missiological and Missionary Training**

As the Seventh-day Adventist world church engages in mission, it also necessarily wrestles with missiological foundations and the real world issues of training cross-cultural workers for a worldwide work. A broad based and biblical theological foundation for mission provides a foundation for both missions and mission training.

As important as the eschatological dimensions for Adventist mission theology are, the wide variety of mission activity demands a well thought through theology of mission that has to be informed by the entire salvation story including elements mentioned earlier: creation, covenant, sanctuary, incarnation, prophecy, the life of Christ, and the apostolic church. Training for a variety of mission expressions in praxis can be informed by a well-developed mission theology through study.

### **Missional Theology**

The world is undergoing rapid change; these changes affect the church and its mission. While the church continues to grow and develop new ministries and methods of outreach it is imperative that there be a positive and holistic theological foundation for mission. If the church is to prepare people of other world religions for the Second Coming of Christ, the church needs a robust theology of mission that will provide grounding for mission. The church needs a theological platform that will be broad enough to have an apocalyptic message and encourage love our fellow man while driving us into experimental spirituality.

According to Wilbert Shenk, “The calling of the church is to glorify the Triune God (1) by faithfully witnessing to the reign of God, and (2) by living as a sign of that reign” (Shenk 2003:15). While the world changes, our witness must be not only eschatological but also holistic in order to be

eternally relevant to people who do not yet know Jesus.

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