Summary

In the Bible we encounter an array of examples of change—certainly more than the five I’ve cited here. However, the ones listed here are particularly instructive, I believe, because we still face each of these issues today. They aren’t something that happened once and have never happened again.

Growth necessitates change. So does diversification of ministries. So does greater globalization of mission. And greater globalization of mission, in turn, forces a re-examination of what’s essential Christianity and what’s mere cultural trapping. And, certainly, the failure of Christ to return as quickly as we as Seventh-day Adventists first expected means that we, like the apostles of old, need to ensure that the church not abandon its hope just because his return hasn’t met our particular timetable.

As a church we face a changing world. As a church we have to make changes to minister to our changing world. Fortunately, we have Bible-based models offering helpful insight into how to go about it.

* All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version.
been challenged. Adjustments and counter-adjustments were made so that God’s truth might respond to our unanswered questions.

In fact, every one of our doctrines surfaced in the wake of multiple questions, debates, study, prayer, theological re-adjustments, and changes. In the early 1860s, leaders who saw the need to define our beliefs faced strong opposition from those who felt that setting up doctrines would kill any further spiritual and theological development.

In their quest for relevancy, early Adventists had to figure out who they were, what they believed, and how they should behave. Gradually, unity emerged in the tension between diversity and conformity, and identity was achieved. The history of that process is reflected in the church’s 28 beliefs.

Today, despite ongoing institutionalization, Seventh-day Adventism still considers itself a movement. The Church manual still holds that the Holy Spirit can lead the church “to a fuller understanding of Bible truth” (2000:9). We can therefore expect still more doctrinal changes as new situations arise. As we look back over the last 160 years and more, it is obvious that all our beliefs, doctrines, practices, and institutions arose to answer questions or to meet a need. Inconsistencies have created opportunities for truth to outshine error in people’s lives and lead them to finite perceptions of God’s infinite truths. We praise God for his grace and mercy towards us.

But who asked the questions? Whose needs were considered? Overwhelmingly, those of 19th and 20th century North Americans. In fact, even today, in Brazil, France, China, Australia or Africa, ministers and missionaries often must show what problems arose in North America two centuries ago and how early Adventists solved them, in order to explain particular Seventh-day Adventist practices or beliefs such as Sabbath School, prayer, jewelry, vegetarianism, marriage, or Sabbath observance. Doing cross-cultural ministry in a multicultural church, which is fundamentally monocultural in its mission to generate a universal movement, is a challenge!

The hottest debate in missions today centers on contextualiza-
In traditional evangelism, we take people with us to show them Bible truth. In contextualized evangelism, we go with them to empower them to discover Bible truth. Undeniably, the Bible only becomes meaningful as it interfaces with human life.

A people’s understanding of the Bible can only spring forth from their cultural perspective. Eventually, however, that understanding will impact their worldview. Hence, contextualization will lead a people to an array of Bible truth facets, all just as valid as our own, especially in their context.

In some places, those being evangelized fear traditional evangelism because it makes them choose between integrity and belonging. They want contextualization because it harmonizes policy with relevancy. Interestingly, people on whom traditional evangelism imposed tremendous personal identity sacrifices are generally the fiercest proponents of that kind of evangelism. It seems unfair to them for new converts to be understood and allowed to grow in their understanding, while they were not allowed to do so.

In Muslim countries such as Guinea, the Seventh-day Adventist Church should have doctrines that define the church within the local religious and cultural scene. Many people in Guinea cannot relate to some of the 28 fundamental beliefs. Sometimes the doctrinal theme is a non-issue; sometimes the reasoning behind the doctrine is irrelevant here. And then there are many crucial issues that do not receive the treatment they deserve, if they are considered at all, such as angels, Satan, the practice of prayer, fasting, the Oneness of Allah, holy war, pilgrimage, and paradise.

It is time that we realize that the shape of the “God-shaped hole” in people’s lives varies significantly from country to country, from one people to another.
other. That is precisely where our God shines forth again! With his many names and attributes and facets, he can fill any and all of those voids, and we can still be united in his oneness.

I dream of the day when, as insiders, we will expose the Bible to seekers in its simplicity, in their context, in their language, in their culture, and in their worldview. I pray that, within every unreached people group, a new belief system that is 100 percent relevant to them will emerge over time from within their culture. I long to see truth seekers wrestle with all issues, unaware for a time of the existence of a Seventh-day Adventist Church in America.

May God grant all nations and peoples wisdom and his Holy Spirit to define their belief system against their own cultural background, that as a beacon in the night they might stand with full relevancy and deep meaning in the presence of their unreached peers. With a renewed awareness that it’s not about us--it’s about them and their God--let’s re-dedicate ourselves to being God’s instruments to facilitate the fulfillment of their heart needs.

Please, let us not make them own our history. May their own history happen! May they face their own dilemmas. Let us teach them to search the Scriptures for truth. May their own Joseph Bates, James Whites, Uriah Smiths, and A. G. Daniells arise from within their ranks. May the Holy Spirit guide them and set their pace in reaching their own doctrinal conclusions which will inevitably be the same as ours, but in their expression, with their emphasis. Then and only then, will they belong to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and own its truths.

Just think of the incredible array of histories to the glory of God! How enriching that would be to us all, how mind-opening! Of course, if that were to happen, we would have no choice but to release full control to God. But then, we would see our God bigger, greater, and more beautiful than ever before!

We would celebrate his infinite greatness as he interfaces with other peoples and cultures simultaneously, bringing each one, at their own stage and pace, along their path towards him. All peoples would be moving in different directions yet to the same destination! Those with a bent on legalism would be learning grace, and those with a bent on permissiveness would be learning law and order.

Put them all together, and the rich, colorful, portrait of unity in diversity will reset our priorities and values to his, and our cups will overflow! And right about then, we will be lifting off together to spend eternity with our Maker.

Works Cited

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