Viewpoint: Reforming Christians or converting non-Christians?

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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 long history and ongoing work of Roman Catholic missionaries among non-Christian peoples. They quickly become 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). Luther saw mission primarily as restoring biblical principles like *sola scriptura, sola gratia,* and *sola fide* within the church. Christians should bear witness to non-Christians when possible but no specific missionary structure was needed. The period of Lutheran orthodoxy (c. 1580-1675) saw an even more narrow view of mission as Lutherans were locked into theological conflict among themselves and with other Protestants. The Great Commission was understood to have been fulfilled by the Apostles, leaving no universal obligation for Christians. Non-Christians living within Christendom were to be evangelized but Christians had no obligation to those beyond Christian circles.

Philip Spener (1635-1705) was the Lutheran Pietist who led a reawakening of the missionary impulse. August Francke (1663-1727), at the Univer-
sity of Halle, recruited Bartholomaeus Zigenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau
to go to Tranquebar, in India. Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760)
and the Moravian Brethren began a missionary sending initiative in 1732.
In 1793 William Carey (1761-1834) sailed for India. The momentum in-
creased gradually and the modern Protestant missionary movement was
dawning as the nineteenth-century began. From the time Luther nailed
the 95 Theses on the cathedral door in 1517, three centuries would pass
before a strong Protestant missionary movement to non-Christians would
be underway.

The church of all ages has had to be converted and reconverted to
God’s whole mission to humanity. Even the Apostles themselves had to be
converted to God’s whole mission. Peter’s vision of the unclean animals
and his subsequent baptism of Cornelius and family (Acts 10) was a piv-
otal 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 just as the Early Church
had, but it took much longer. Their reformation of theology did not extend
far enough into a biblical theology of mission. They spent too long debat-
ing theology between themselves. They ignored the “so what?” question.
What good is excellent theology if it does not produce strong mission?
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. In 1901 the church reor-
ganized itself because it had developed a global mission focus. The last
century has seen steady expansion around the globe, but how well con-
verted are today’s Adventists to God’s whole mission? How complete is
our mission focus?

To evaluate the Adventist mission focus 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 Laodi-
cea (Rev 3:14-22). Second, Adventists have a mission to share a reform-
ing 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, Ad-
ventists have an external mission to non-Christians—Muslims, Hindus,
Buddhists, and others—the Adventist missio externa.
Is there an 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*, some argue that unless things are right within the church the other two dimensions will fail. On the other hand, 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 an argument I have heard. One prominent leader even expressed the view that “nurture” was not even a good word to use. For the *missio interna-externa* the case for completing the unfinished Reformation within Christianity is often made. For the *missio externa* the argument is that non-Christians are the ones in the most dire need of the gospel. I don’t think Adventists have thought seriously enough about this last point.

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 paints a picture in which the three dimensions of mission are overlapping, intertwined, mutually supportive, and equally important. There was nurturing instruction, member fellowship, and sustained 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 would support this balanced and integrated three-dimensional model of mission—at least theoretically.

Where do Adventists place their real, actual, on-the-mission-field priorities? Without a doubt Adventists place the lowest priority on *missio externa*—mission to non-Christians who, as a group, are in the most dire need of the gospel. Like other contemporary Protestants, Adventists commit just a small fraction of their human and material resources to mission among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and the adherents of other religions. 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 the early Protestants who were more concerned with reforming Christians than converting non-Christians. To be fair, Adventists are more converted in theory to *missio externa* than the early Protestants, 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, we generally tend to provide weak nurture and discipling for new members. This oversight may be a by-product of the priority we give...
When most converts come from other Christian denominations they do not appear to need as much spiritual nurturing as converted Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus would need.

**Conclusion**

Today’s Adventist Church needs a fuller conversion to God’s mission to non-Christian peoples that goes beyond head commitment to impact its hands, feet, and pocket books. Three powerful realities support the assertion that a fuller Adventist conversion to God’s whole mission is needed.

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 message. 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’s population. By working mostly to reform Christians, Adventists have made an inadvertent choice to focus on just one-third of humanity.

Third, the Adventist membership has grown nicely but not where people in the most dire need of the gospel are concentrated. The geographic areas where 75 percent of the least evangelized non-Christian peoples reside contain only 25 percent of the Adventist membership. Saying it another way, 75 percent of Adventists live, work, and witness in areas with just 25 percent of the world’s population. In yet another snapshot, 76 percent of Adventists reside in the Americas and in Sub-Saharan Africa, leaving only 24 percent in the entire remaining world.

These reflections about Adventist mission have many implications. 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 stern challenges of mission among non-Christian peoples.

Second, Adventists need to avoid the theological in-fighting that distracted early Protestants from mission. Chasing down every wrong trend within Christianity can distract the church from God’s whole mission. A strong focus on bringing the Adventist message to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and postmoderns will give appropriate focus and scale to issues we face with other Christians.

Third, 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 message. Adventists who experiment with new methods often function on the periphery where personal danger is common. Ironically, these pioneers sometimes experience opposition and hostility from fellow Adventists who work in comfortable offices and ivory towers. The Adventist mission pioneers of the future who will discover more effective methods will need permission for trial and error experimentation, prayerful support and guidance, and freedom from distant critics.

Fourth, Adventist mission needs to function strategically. The left and right hands need to know what the other is doing so as to work together harmoniously. Human and material resources need to be allocated strategically.

There never has been as many people living at any 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.

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