

Doing theology in mission

Part I

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Mission and theology go together. True theology should move us to mission, and mission rightly practiced should lead to theology. However, while Paul undoubtedly had a theology before his Gentile mission, his theology, as reflected in the epistles, undoubtedly arose out of his mission commission and his experience of proclaiming the gospel. His entire written theology and a large part of his proclaimed theology were birthed by his gospel proclamation.

The risen Christ's final words to His disciples are about mission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19, RSV). Later, the same Christ revealed Himself to Paul, who says that this appearance came "in order that I [Paul] might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal. 1:16). The disciples and Paul were called by Christ to pursue a mission, not to create a theology. In the process of doing mission, they were led to do theology. Their theologies were explanations of the gospel to the particular context they addressed in their evangelism. The basic facts of the gospel were the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How these facts were proclaimed depended on the culture of the hearers. All theology arises out of such a context.¹

For us, the same process should happen. We have the gospel core (Scripture), and we go on mission to share that with others. For this sharing to take place, we must hear their beliefs (i.e., context) and speak in a way that makes the gos-

pel understandable. Context interacts with the gospel (Scripture) in the process of mission, and the result is theology.

A problem comes when proponents of a theology developed in one context begin to think their particular theology is supra-cultural and is normative for other contexts. A person or group is so enamored with their way of framing the gospel that they begin to believe that all should explain things as *they* do. They absolutize their theology and consider it timeless. Such actions impede mission completion. While it is helpful to learn the content of Luther's and Wesley's theology, it is—in most cases—of more value to learn how they *did* theology and follow that process in our current mission.

The study of theology should at its core include learning to practice the theological process. Past theologies can furnish examples and be instructive but are not necessarily normative for today. Adventist theology has arisen in a particular context in the process of following a mission. That was right and proper. This has produced, I would argue, a very good theology. But I believe that we have (rightly) made a major readjustment in our mission. This readjustment in mission means we face a new context and thus require new theologies. I am not suggesting we forfeit core scriptural beliefs or abandon Bible principles. What I do believe is that explanations of and reasons for belief must be re-examined. Our theological framework should be thought through as well as the emphasis and priority we give certain elements of our belief. Basic assumptions may need overhaul.

In 1990, when then Adventist church President Neal Wilson began to talk about a global strategy initiative, which later became Global Mission, I think few realized what it all meant.² I suggest it was a major turning point. It signaled a refocusing of Adventist mission. This strategy moved away from past initiatives, which had emphasized numbers of baptisms, and began to talk about planting churches among million-population segments where there was presently no church. It authorized the formation of study centers to further evangelism among the various non-Christian world religions. It set up a new structure to ensure these goals. Through God's grace and the support of the church, this initiative has had a far-reaching impact.

This new mission is in the process of giving rise to a revised theology. A prime example is the new statement of belief, "Growing in Christ," voted at the recent church session at St. Louis. The impetus for this new statement arose directly

from a mission issues committee set up to deal with the theological questions arising out of the pursuance of global mission. This process must continue. We must pursue with even more zeal our God-ordained mission and with vision do theology as we go.

What I propose in this article are some insights that can help us do this task of mission and theology more efficiently so that God can be glorified and the mission fulfilled. I suggest, first of all, the viewpoint/worldview or consciousness that should undergird and will foster this endeavor. Secondly, I propose that we consider very seriously the new context in which we find ourselves, the new mode with which we need to pursue our mission, and the new identity all of this may imply.

Developing a missiological consciousness

In order to rightly proceed with the task of doing theology in the context of our refocused mission, we need to understand a basic outlook that underlies that endeavor.³

A convenient way to understand this issue is to define worldview and consciousness. According to anthropologist/missiologist Paul Hiebert, "a world view provides people with their basic assumptions about reality."⁴ Such assumptions are usually unconscious or only vaguely understood. In the course of time other words with similar meaning have come into use. One of these is "consciousness." Missiologist Harvie Conn uses this word to refer to an aspect of worldview that relates to the human understanding of religion and the role of God and science.⁵ By "consciousness" Conn and this writer understand that the term refers to a view of life and God, and in particular the way we see ourselves, others, and God (or the Bible) functioning. Consciousness by this definition is not some New-Age idea about "higher consciousness," but a term describing the foundational concepts and attitudes that shape our lives and especially our views of God and belief. Let me briefly describe five types of consciousness.

Each consciousness has elements of truth in it. Often people move from one

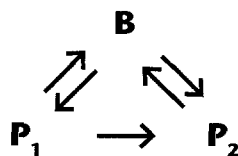
consciousness to another in the order I describe them, but this is not always so. Many times people understand intellectually a certain type of consciousness but do not practice it, while some choose to live deliberately or unknowingly using a different type of consciousness. Consciousness level is not related to intelligence and may or may not indicate spirituality.

Self-consciousness. In self-consciousness, the world centers on me. This could also be called *ego consciousness*. I recognize myself, and though eventually I recognize others, they are useful only as they help or serve me. Children begin here, and, unfortunately, without proper training and a knowledge of God, many continue living at this consciousness long after childhood. This stage can be diagrammed simply as

P₁

P (for person) stands alone and is the basic determiner of understanding. Although quite self-centered, this consciousness is important to self-identity and is psychologically a key part of life.

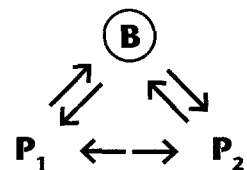
Other consciousness. When a person seriously takes into account other people, other consciousness arrives. The "other" could also include God as He reveals himself in the Bible. Ideally for a Christian these two go together. A person recognizes God's love and authority and learns that they should love other persons. This act of taking God and other people seriously is a change of consciousness. Other consciousness (for a Christian) can be diagrammed in this way:



To the P₁ (person standing alone) have been added P₂ (other persons) and B (the Bible, God's Word). The Bible is pictured as above because it is an authority to be followed. P₁ assumes the Bible speaks more or less directly to him/her (and other people as well), and they are to obey. The person is told to love the

other and share God's Word. They assume that they can pass on God's Word directly to others. They (P₁) also assume that when others (P₂) listen to the Bible, they (P₂) hear from it exactly what they (P₁) have themselves heard. The one-way arrows signify mainly one-way, non-dialogic communication.

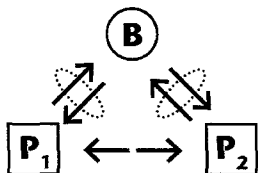
Historical consciousness. Historical consciousness comes with Christian education, either informal or formal. People discover that the Bible was written in a different language from their own, at a different historical time, and within a different cultural context. Missionaries, teachers, and pastors share historical consciousness with believers as a means of helping them apply the Bible and answer their questions about its content. Historical consciousness deals with issues such as why most Christians today are not obligated to dress as Jesus and the apostles did and to greet one another with a "holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5:26). Historical consciousness can be diagrammed like this:



The circle around B (Bible) means that it is now seen to be in a particular cultural/historical context. The two-way arrows between P₁/P₂ and the Bible signify dialogue. While the Bible still is authority, it must now be interpreted. Both P₁ and P₂ dialogue with it, seeking to find reasons and principles behind specific instruction. P₁ and P₂, however, still understand themselves as being without cultural baggage. P₁ assumes that if P₂ is honest, he or she will see the same thing in the Bible as P₁ does.

Theological consciousness. The fourth consciousness, theological consciousness, recognizes that P₁ is also living, experiencing, and seeing within a culture. This means that the very way she/he looks at the Bible is affected by their background, language, nationality, and history. The movement to live at theological consciousness is difficult because the human heart naturally sees

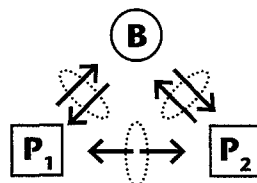
its own understanding as valid, clear, and unbiased. While it is easy to see others as culturally conditioned, to see oneself that way demands special grace! Theological consciousness can be diagrammed as such:



The boxes around both P_1 and P_2 signify that P_1 recognizes that their culture affects the interpretation of what the Bible says. The ellipses through which the two-way dialogue arrows pass represent filters. P_1 recognizes that they view Scripture through a filter. Culture is the filter. Note, however, that both P_1 and P_2 have squares around them. Their cultures are assumed to be similar. Because they are both human, the cultural differences between them are not seen as significant.

Missiological consciousness. The final kind of consciousness builds on the earlier consciousness types. The term *missiological consciousness* is used because in this step P_1 recognizes that P_2 is truly different, and the same dialogue and same filter that are in place between P_1 and the Bible should be between P_1

and P_2 —regardless of whether P_2 is a nonbeliever or a fellow believer. Cultural difference is as important (or even perhaps more important) for true communication between P_1 and P_2 as belief difference. Missiological consciousness can be diagrammed thus:



The same dialogue arrows and filters that were used in biblical interpretation are now in place between P_1 and P_2 . The Bible maintains its authority. Both P_1 and P_2 have equal access to the Bible. After seeking to discover God's will in Scripture, while recognizing their own biases, they are now prepared to communicate as equals. They understand clearly that their vision of truth and reality has been affected by who they are.

Remember that the type of consciousness exhibited by a person has little or nothing to do with intellect or commitment. Many who operate at other consciousness or historical consciousness are more committed to God than some believers who live at theological consciousness or missiological consciousness. Types of consciousness deal only with

understanding and mode of action. However, people at theological consciousness and missiological consciousness will usually be more effective as cross-cultural missionaries and evangelists than those who manifest other consciousness or historical consciousness.

Consciousness change

How does change of consciousness level take place? Level of consciousness does *not* mean spiritual condition or intelligence. It has simply to do with understanding—and hopefully action—in one area of life. It is important, however, because Christians have been given the mandate to share God's message with the whole world. Other-consciousness people can effectively share with their own culture but can be disastrous as cross-cultural missionaries. Consciousness is also crucial to unity and understanding in a world church. The more developed the consciousness level (provided earlier consciousness lessons are not forgotten!), the more biblically and lovingly Christians can relate to both fellow believers and unbelievers of other cultures.

The movement from self-consciousness to other-consciousness comes through conversion. Persons living for self come to recognize themselves as children of God, with Jesus as Lord. Evangelism facilitates this change. Some people, who are under the authority of the wrong "other" (false gods/religions), also need a conversion from that false god to the true one.

The movement from other consciousness to historical consciousness usually comes through religious education. Some educated people already understand this step at their conversion from self-consciousness. They come to other-consciousness and historical consciousness at roughly the same time. However, the majority of people develop an understanding of historical consciousness and at least practice it to some degree as a result of study. In-depth religious education and especially theological education usually assume and/or teach historical consciousness.

The movement from historical consciousness to theological consciousness

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and missiological consciousness is problematic. Theological consciousness and missiological consciousness require a clear recognition that one's own way of seeing things is incomplete and biased by culture. Some things I may see well, but on other issues even "uneducated

that is theological consciousness. The realization that those with different cultural perspectives have valuable original insights and must be taken seriously can lead to greater self-understanding.

I still vividly remember how Asian friends and colleagues taught me how to

NEW CONTEXT, NEW MODE, NEW IDENTITY. NOW THAT'S A CHALLENGE!

people" may have insights that have escaped me. More than likely that realization will call into question some of my cherished viewpoints. Throughout this process of discovery, people are moved out of their comfort zone. It is one thing to admit in historical consciousness that the Bible is culturally contextualized, but it comes a lot closer to home when, in theological consciousness and missiological consciousness, I see the same in myself! Could parts of the Bible that I have ignored because of my culture actually teach important concepts I have been missing? These ideas are not easy to come to terms with! They require not simply a change of consciousness but a humility of heart that is a gift of God.

For a number of years I worked at the Institute of World Mission, helping prepare Seventh-day Adventist missionaries for cross-cultural service. Although it is not stated as such, we have a threefold aim for our intensive training. First, we examine and affirm the call to mission. Second, we confirm and strengthen basic Christian commitment (other consciousness). Third, we attempt to move people to theological consciousness and missiological consciousness. Most who come to us (and in fact a majority in the church) operate at historical consciousness.

How do we go about bringing this change in understanding? We have found that teaching sensitivity to and communication with another culture—missiological consciousness—often leads to the "aha" experience of self-understanding

deal with differences. My direct western approach was not effective in Asia. My understanding was that the key issue was honesty, which, to my western way of thinking, implied directness. They schooled me to see that love and harmony were central and that indirectness was a much better way. Honesty did not necessarily mean directness and confrontation. I saw not only what they did in a new light, but I saw my own culture in a changed way. I even became convinced that in most cases their method worked better and was more biblical than mine.

Realizing my missionary bias, I nonetheless believe that one of the best ways to come to theological consciousness and missiological consciousness is to actually live in another culture. Being forced to learn a new language and incarnate oneself into another setting gives a kind of shock treatment that can be conducive to the revolution in this thinking. ■

Part 2 in the January issue

¹Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 49-53.

²"World Report," *Adventist Review*, January 11, 1990, 22.

³The rest of this section is based heavily on Jon Dybdahl's "Culture and Biblical Understanding," in *Women in Ministry*, ed. N. Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), 418-22 and 426-28.

⁴Paul Heibert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1976), 371.

⁵Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 46-50, 88.

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