

# Doing theology in mission— part 2

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Once a missiological consciousness is understood and, hopefully, practiced, what are the next steps we can take to effectively proclaim the gospel? I suggest that we must recognize three core changes that have taken place in our world and begin as much as possible to adjust our mission practices to them. These are a new context, a new mode, and a new identity.

## The new context

*Basic thesis: The earlier context of Adventist theology was mission to other Christians. The new context is mission to a pluralistic world often dominated by non-Christian religions.*

I vividly remember during my earlier years as a missionary talking to some older Adventist missionaries to India. I asked them what their evangelistic approach to Hindus was. They replied, "We don't go to Hindus. We search out Christians and give them further light." Even though India is officially 82 percent Hindu and perhaps 14 percent Muslim, they concentrated on the small Christian minority.<sup>1</sup> This was undoubtedly easier for these missionaries because their theological training all focused on reaching other Christians.

Translation of Bible studies, evangelistic sermons, and books does *not* do the trick. Framework, cultural issues, priorities, examples, and subjects chosen all come from the Christian West. To reach other religions means a rethinking of

the whole endeavor. We are beginning to take these steps, although some mass-produced Bible studies and DVDs are not sensitive to this issue. I point out three attempts that have been made to be sensitive to this issue.

Scott Griswold, now director of the Buddhist study center, as a missionary in Cambodia formulated a set of Bible studies for the Cambodian Buddhist people. While being totally biblical, the subjects chosen, the arrangement of topics, and the illustrations and stories used were all deliberately thought through with Cambodian communication in mind. The studies were extremely popular among our pastors, and many non-Adventist Christians purchased the lessons because they saw their appeal. I have included a list of the topics covered in this lesson study series in Appendix 1.

In 1995, a scholar—under the pseudonym Abdel Nur—published *Bahakat Allah*, a six-booklet study guide for Muslims. Since Abdel is always working to improve, there may have been some revisions to this guide, but I have included in Appendix 2 a list of topics covered in the 1995 edition.

These guides not only use Muslim terminology and deal with topics of concern to Muslims but are arranged deliberately to lead Muslims step by step into fuller knowledge of Jesus and the deeper practice of the spiritual life. They are not only topically sequential but experientially progressive as well.

During our pioneering missionary days in North Thailand, we began working among the mountain-dwelling animistic Hmong people. As family by family people came to believe, we decided we needed a song book. Many Hmong were illiterate, but we adopted the Romanized Hmong formulated by earlier missionaries and began to teach Hmong to read so they could use the Bible and song book. We also decided they should have a brief statement of our beliefs in the form of a simple catechism or question-and-answer format. Pastor Leng and I worked on this belief statement, and we printed it in the back of the song book—the first Adventist Hmong book. I have often told people that this statement is the most important theological document I have ever had a part in writing. I provide you a translation in Appendix 3. Note that core Adventist beliefs are covered, but that the statement is simple, brief, and completely set in the Hmong world of concern for evil spirits and the practice of the spiritual life.

I make no claim of infallibility for any of these attempts, but plead that similar efforts be made in all parts of the world so the gospel can be heard clearly.

## The new mode

*Basic thesis: Traditionally Adventist theology has seen truth as doctrinal and used the modes of logic, rational argument, and philosophy to convince people to accept correct belief. The “new” mode emphasizes experience. Truth is a living experience of God’s presence, which involves an active devotional life, seeing God at work in daily affairs, improving family and community life, and reforming ethics.*

Scholars of societal change in North America have noticed for years the trends of postmodernism to emphasize experience in matters of spirituality. Books that emphasize mission to contemporary life have often given this trend an important place in their works.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that successful missionaries to contemporary North American culture must be open to show Christianity as an experience, not simply as a philosophical statement.

Most North American churches have not really grasped that point. Church membership is based on intellectually believing certain things. This is part of a heritage that emphasizes creeds, confessions, and statements of belief. Adventists have probably done better than some in this area since Sabbath observance and ethical standards are part of the package, but still, for many, Adventism is understood as basically acceptance of a list of intellectual doctrinal statements.

Doctrinal truth is important, but biblical faith is always a lived-out/experienced faith. They must go together, and many young Adventists do not see Adventism as an experience of God.

When this fact dawned on me, I, as a missiologist, began to look at other religions. Even a simple look at the most basic statements of these major faiths showed how experiential they are, especially as compared to Christianity.

### Islam has five pillars.<sup>3</sup>

1. Declaration of faith—“There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet.”
2. Prayer—All Muslims are called to pray five times a day in the same way.
3. Almsgiving—A set alms tax is required yearly with percentages varying from 2 to 10 percent on the basis of the

material paid on. Other almsgiving is also encouraged.

4. Fasting—Muslims fast between sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan.
5. Pilgrimage—This pilgrimage to Mecca takes place yearly and all Muslims are called to do it at least once in their lifetime.

Notice the nature of these five pillars. Only one, the first, is theological or creedal. The other four deal with spiritual practice and ethics. To be a Muslim is to live a Muslim religious experience.

Take the example of Buddhism. Buddhism’s core teaching is the four noble truths.<sup>4</sup> These truths are (1) suffering is a universal fact; (2) the cause of suffering is desire; (3) there is a state where we can be free of desire and thus escape suffering; and (4) we arrive at that state by the eight-fold path.

The eight-fold path deals with *moral-ity*, including truth telling, theft, murder, immorality, etc. Paths four through six deal with *concentration*. This presents ways to get rid of evil thoughts and be aware of our world. Meditation and higher states of consciousness are called for. The last two paths call for *wisdom*.

Notice again the heavy emphasis on experience. The four noble truths address directly the universal human experience of pain and suffering. The eight-fold path talks about ethics, the practice of meditation, and the spiritual life. Today many Buddhist sects are differentiated by the forms of meditation they practice. Most Christian denominations are differentiated by doctrinal beliefs, *not* spiritual practice.

Lastly, consider the charismatic movement. Birthed in the early months of the twentieth century in the United States, the movement has exploded worldwide. What began as a separate group of denominations later spread to other mainline denominations and has now seen some of its convictions and part of its practice become well-nigh universal in Christianity. The numbers of people involved and the percentage growth of the movement are staggering. The actual membership of charismatic churches is over 10 percent of the world’s population and about one-third of all Christians, but its influence spreads much further.<sup>5</sup>

The movement claims to be an orthodox form of Christian faith. Belief in the Holy Spirit has been espoused by all Christian creeds. What is new about the charismatic movement is the conviction that God through the Holy Spirit is really active in everyday life and can be experienced. The primary ways emphasized have been in fervent worship, speaking in tongues, healing of physical and emotional problems, expulsion of demons, and various physical manifestations. While one may question the validity of some of the experiences, we cannot quarrel with the basic premise. Instead of simply condemning this movement and presenting our beliefs in a traditional way, who will write/preach the first series that recasts Adventism as a powerful experience of God’s presence and spell out how to be a part of that life? The experiential aspect of the charismatic movement is, in my mind, its major driving force.

Most realize that experience needs to be balanced with thought and explanation. Experience without such a balance is eventually lost. I am not suggesting we abandon theological explanation or doctrinal truth but return to a biblical balance that makes truth lived/experienced truth. This is especially true in the present-day missionary context.

## The new identity

*Basic thesis: Traditional Adventist identity has seen itself as a small remnant among Christian churches. We are the ultimate Protestants with an ecclesiastical identity. The new identity awakens us to the fact that we are not necessarily small (we are the largest Protestant church in at least 14 countries,<sup>6</sup> about the size of Judaism, and over half the size of Sikhism<sup>7</sup>), and it may be time to think seriously about how we label ourselves.*

I grew up feeling small and different as an Adventist. Different may still be true, but in many parts of the world and overall, the small is questionable. Adventism in many areas of the world is a major religious player.

What we must remember is that remnants begin small but need not and in most cases do not remain small. The small remnant of Jews who returned to

Jerusalem from Babylon did not remain small. By the time of Jesus, Palestinian Judaism was the major force in the religion. Christians saw themselves as the true remnant of Judaism. That remnant has in size far outstripped the original piece of cloth in size.

What is of most concern for me here is the mindset of smallness. Too many see smallness as a framework for our mission. Because we are small and different, we cannot expect to get a hearing from large numbers of people. This is all wrong. If “the remnant” has truth, it has broad appeal and can hold its own in the world of religious ideas. Smallness thinking has often created a sense of inferiority and a resignation to rejection of the message, both of which are counterproductive to mission.

Besides the issue of “smallness,” the identity question raises also the issue of how we view the nature of our religious community. I suggest here three possible kinds of identities. Please remember that these are tentative suggestions only and that there could also be some combination of these ideas that could make sense as well.

**Identity no. 1: Adventism as a pan-religious movement drawing a remnant from all religions.** Adventists have commonly seen themselves as a remnant of other Christians. Recently, a subtle shift has taken place in the minds of some. They have begun to see the remnant as any from *all* backgrounds who respond to the remnant message.<sup>8</sup> The Adventist Church then proclaims the remnant message to those in all religions who have been prepared by God to hear it. This remnant may not necessarily join the visible institutional form of the Adventist Church.

Abdel Nur has attempted to pragmatically apply this concept and found a movement based on it.<sup>9</sup> He has helped to found and nurture a movement that draws a remnant believing in the Sabbath and second coming from mainstream Islam while allowing believers to continue to identify with their Islamic culture and heritage. One of the things the church continues to do is to wrestle with how to relate to this new and creative remnant movement of the spirit. This movement is one model for how this new identity might work.

**Identity no. 2: Adventism as a movement that is more than a denomination.** Traditionally we have seen Adventism as a denomination that one must formally belong to in order to be classified as a Seventh-day Adventist. This identity would broaden us to see some who have not formally joined our organization as part of the “Adventist movement.” Adventists have long believed, based on Ellen White’s teaching, that non-Adventists will be saved. This merely formally acknowledges this.

A model would be the charismatic movement. Initially Pentecostals formed denominations and expected those who had their experience to join these denominations. But this has begun to change since the mid ’50s, and the phenomenon has quickly spread to other churches. Many espoused most or all of the unique Pentecostal teaching and experience but remained in their original denomination.

A third phase developed when in the 1970s and ’80s<sup>10</sup> elements of the Pentecostal experience were adopted gradually by many church groups. All these three groups or levels together form the present charismatic movement.

Could such a thing happen in Adventism? I’m not sure, but several things could be pointed out. Adventism began as a movement among churches, and many early leaders resisted formation of a denomination. In a sense, we would be going back to our roots.

We should also point out that some of the same things that have happened in the charismatic movement have happened to us. The difference is that we and others have not often pointed it out or acknowledged it. When Adventism was born, most Christians were postmillennialists who believed that the second coming of Jesus took place after 1000 years of peace on earth. Now, although they may not agree with us on all points, most Christians are premillennialists who believe as we do that Jesus’ second coming takes place before the millennium. Some churches now worship on Sabbath. There has been movement among many Christian groups to Adventist-like beliefs. What do we think of such things and how should they shape our identity? Could it be possible to promote

an Adventist movement identity that operates on three levels like the charismatic one?

**Identity no. 3: Adventism as a world religion.** Adventism has clearly presented itself as a Protestant denomination and has fought to be viewed as a legitimate orthodox nonheretical Christian body. Is this the way it should be now and always?

My suggestion here is not having to do with changing our beliefs but with viewing our identity. Christianity in many parts of the world—especially Islamic ones—is viewed as an extremely decadent religion. The identity of Christianity with the western secular world is in many parts of the world a serious barrier to proclaiming the message of Jesus. It is a label that has been corrupted and misused. To call oneself Christian in these areas creates problems and barriers.

On the other hand, many of the religions of the world today grew out of other religions. The prime example is Christianity, whose earliest followers saw themselves as a reforming sect of Judaism. They were the true Jews and only much later did a separate identity develop.

Buddhism is often called the “middle way” because it sees itself as the moderate path between the extreme asceticism of Jainism and the self-indulgence of Hinduism. In many ways its core beliefs and philosophies parallel those of Jainism and Hinduism, yet it has positioned itself as a reformer of these two other world faiths.

I would suggest that Adventism has some characteristics that make it fit more as a world religion than as a Christian denomination. Major world religions all have dietary restrictions or ideals. Few Christians do. Conservative world religion communities have careful behavioral standards relating to dress, entertainment, etc. Adventists can identify with this. The complete system of Adventism, which includes educational and health institutions as well as churches, is shared and appreciated by world religions.

In short, I believe we could position ourselves as a world religion without compromising our beliefs and perhaps even appear more credible in many parts of the world.

## Conclusion

I am by conviction and passion a missionary. That means that my deepest concern is discovering how best we can fulfill Christ's final commission to us, His followers. Theology must arise out of that and serve that goal. That means my aim here has been to ask how the mission we have adopted can best be pursued and how taking it seriously may affect business as usual in the church. My hope and prayer is not that you will accept all

my suggestions but rather that you will be inspired anew to use all your creativity and energy in fulfilling the task Jesus called us to do. ❏

- 1 Patrick Johnston, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 274.
- 2 See, for example, Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 185–235, and Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 56–61, 69–71.
- 3 See, for example, David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions* (London: SPCK, 1975), 213–16.

- 4 *Ibid.*, 126–29.
- 5 David B. Barnett and Todd M. Johnson, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2004" in *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 28 (2004) 1:25.
- 6 Jon L. Dybdahl, "Adventist Mission Today" in *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Jon L. Dybdahl (Review and Herald, 1999), 18.
- 7 Barret and Johnson, 25.
- 8 George Knight, "Remnant Theology and World Mission" in *Adventist Mission*, ed. Dybdahl, 94.
- 9 Jerald Whitehouse, "Reaching the Muslim World" in *Adventist Mission*, ed. Dybdahl, 189–197.
- 10 Peter Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry in Any Church* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1988), 37–64. Wagner seems to have originated this term.

## Appendix 1:

# Cambodian Bible Lessons

1. Will there ever be justice?
2. The correct use of finances
3. Where did this world come from?
4. The family
5. Sin
6. Who knows the future?
7. The difference between religions
8. The birth of the Savior
9. Overcoming temptation
10. Jesus, a good teacher
11. Power over evil spirits
12. God protects us
13. The power to raise the dead
14. Jesus arrested and tried unjustly
15. The death of Jesus
16. The resurrection of Jesus
17. The steps in conversion
18. God calls us to follow him

## Appendix 2:

# Barakat Allah Study Guides

**Book 1: Teacher's guide: introduction and overview**

**Book 2: Allah's blessing through the scriptures and his messengers**

Book 2 leads me to a new trust in all the Holy Books, and of my need to know Allah better and for him to give me a new heart. Then I can worship him with a clean heart.

1. Five articles of faith—signs of righteousness
2. Allah's blessing through the Holy Books
3. Overview of Torah, Zaboor, Injil
4. How to study the Holy Books
5. Allah in the beginning—the story of creation, sin, and the fall
6. Introduction to the prophets
7. Prayer and personal piety

**Book 3: Allah's blessing for power and personal deliverance**

Book 3 leads me to trust in Allah for freedom from fear and in Isa as my mediator for sin. This trust is deepened as I understand more about the last day and how to personally prepare for that great event.

1. Allah's blessing of deliverance from fear
2. Isa the mediator—who can save us?
3. Preparing for the last day: Isa el Masih's coming described: the blessed hope
4. Preparing for the last day: signs of his coming
5. Preparing for the last day: the blessing of the resurrection
6. Allah's blessing even in death
7. Preparing for the last day: the judgment day
8. Paradise—the eternal blessing
9. Preparing for the last day: Allah's last day people

**Book 4: Allah's greatest blessing—the great sacrifice**

In Book 4 my faith in Allah is deepened further as I understand the great plan of Allah in providing the tremendous

sacrifice. My worship is more complete as I make the confession of a true believer.

1. The faith of Ibrahim and the great sacrifice
2. Why a sacrifice?
3. The life of Isa el Masih—deliverance from sin
4. The great victory of Isa el Masih
5. Allah's eternal plan to restore honor in his family
6. The confession of the new believer

**Book 5: Allah's blessing through my religious life**

In Book 5 my trust and worship is tested as I learn more how the true believer should live. The relationship is deepened as I learn of the power for obedience provided through the Holy Spirit.

1. The special blessing of Allah's presence
2. Allah's blessing in my lifestyle
3. Prayer, alms, and fasting
4. Angels, saints, and dead men
5. Allah's special covenant
6. Allah's sign of special blessing
7. The great apostasy versus Allah's sign

**Book 6: Allah's blessed people in the last day**

In Book 6 I am led to a fuller understanding of Allah's last-day people and the fellowship of true believers, which is a witness to God's character among my people.

1. The great apostasy and Allah's call for restoration (Islam in prophecy)
2. The purpose of the judgment day—Allah is just
3. The millennium and the final end of evil

4. Allah's last-day people—the special end-time message for the world
5. The new believer's pilgrimage (baptism—sibghat Allah)
6. Last-day prophets
7. Allah is worth serving—complete restoration—the eternal blessing

### Appendix 3:

## Hmong Statement of Belief

### The Way of Faith

1. Q: Who created the world?  
A: I believe that God (Hmong name for God—Vaj Tswv Saub) created the world, animals, and humans in six days.
2. Q: What is the Creator God like?  
A: I believe that He has greater power than Satan and people. He loves us because He created us and is our Heavenly Father.
3. Q: How should we worship this God we speak of?  
A: I believe that we honor and worship Him when we sing and pray together and remember His creation by resting on the seventh day as He gave us an example.
4. Q: What was the world that God created like?  
A: I believe that the world that God created was beautiful. Evil, sickness, poverty, suffering, and death were not present.
5. Q: Why then is the world today full of sickness, suffering, and death?  
A: I believe that because humanity disobeyed God, this caused all kinds of evil to spread over all of us.
6. Q: Who has the authority and power to help us escape evil and judgment?  
A: I believe that because God loved us, He sent the divine Savior Jesus to help us escape from sin and the grasp of the evil spirits.
7. Q: How does our divine Savior Jesus help us escape from evil, punishment, and the grasp of the devil?  
A: I believe that because our divine Savior Jesus died in our place on the cross, He has the power to help us. If this is so, if we believe in our divine Savior Jesus and discard and renounce our spirit beliefs, Jesus will help us escape from evil and will wash our hearts, making them white and new. He will not allow the spirits to have any power over us.
8. Q: Will we always live on this earth, or will we go somewhere else?  
A: I believe that if we believe in our divine Savior Jesus and wait for Him, He will return to take us to live with Him in the new heavenly city He is preparing. We will live forever there, and all sickness, pain, crying, and death will be no more.
9. Q: If we die before our Savior Jesus returns, how will we rise from the dead?  
A: I believe that when Jesus returns the second time, He will bring us back to life and give eternal life with no more death.
10. Q: As we await the return of Jesus, how should we live?  
A: I believe that we should live as Jesus taught us. We should love one another and join in teaching the Jesus message to those who do not know it. We should live by the Ten Commandments and keep our bodies clean. We should not use opium or tobacco, drink liquor, or eat the meat that God has not given us permission to eat. We will give a tithe of our earnings to help spread the message of God to the whole world.
11. Q: What should we do to keep close to God and avoid falling into sin?  
A: I believe that we should daily sing, pray, and study God's message.

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