Questions on C-5

By Carlos G. Martín

Different words have been used by missionaries of diverse traditions and backgrounds in their attempt to describe missionary strategies to reach non-Christians with the gospel. This has created confusion as often the same words have been used with different meanings. In the end, this resulted in strategies that are not acceptable by one side or the other.

One of these words is *accommodation*, which refers to the presentation of the gospel using local forms in order to elicit the greatest response within a given society. Accommodation refers to the cultural adjustments that have to be made by an outsider in cross-cultural evangelization. In

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Ellen G. White's words (1912),

When you are laboring in a place where souls are just beginning to get scales from their eyes . . . be very careful not to present the truth in such a way as to arouse prejudice, and to close the door of the heart to the truth. Agree with the people on every point you can consistently do so. Let them see that you love their souls, and want to be in harmony with them so far as possible.

True accommodation remains a necessity to begin the gospel's progression into a culture.

Christ drew the hearts of His hearers to Him by the manifestation of His love, and then, little by little, as they were able to bear it, He unfolded to them the great truths of the kingdom. We must also learn to adapt our labors to the condition of the people—to meet people where they are (White 1974:484-485).

Accommodation has consistently been preached as the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church (Considine 1961:59-71). However, many examples of faulty adjustments demonstrate that accommodation has been more a compromise of the faith than an adaptation to the culture (McGavran 1975:42-52). Adventists have been warned:

There is a constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must to a certain extent conform to the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss (White 1943:570).

Another word that has been used is *contextualization.* Simply stated, contextualization refers to the process of making the biblical text and its context meaningful and applicable to the thought patterns and situations of a given people. For the purposes of this article the terms accommodation and contextualization are interchangeable.

to the Word of God as the sole authoritative source for theological content and those who let the historical influences and social circumstances be a factor in determining the content of their message.

Christians with a high view of Scripture would agree that any attempt at accommodation should not alter the content of the gospel (McGavran 1974:52-54); they believe that any attempt at contextualization must not compromise the integrity of biblical doctrines (Martín 1998:19-25). Missionaries must agree with people as much as possible, on every point on which they can consistently do so.

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Contextualization attempts to communicate the gospel in word and deed to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture (Whiteman 2001).

A survey of the methodology of the various models which are proposed for contextualization shows that there are basically two groups: those who adhere

Many missionaries, in their attempt to achieve social contextualization, have adopted a low view of Scripture. They take into account "the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice" (Theological Education Fund 1972:25). For instance, the ethnographic approach begins with the need of an ethnic group willing to "dialogue with Christian tradition whereby that tradition can address questions genuinely posed by the local circumstances" (Schreiter 1985:13-14). Another form of giv-

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ing priority to the social context is the "liberation approach": Some are looking for a revolutionary extension of God's Kingdom by the use of "the socioanalytical tools, . . . and the revolutionary ethos and programme [of Marxism]" (Miguez-Benino 1975:35). These are examples of unacceptable contextualization.

A theology which is not based on biblical exegesis will eventually compromise the integrity of the gospel. Christians with a high view of Scripture believe that faithfulness to the Word of God must be the primary standard for evaluating contextualization. A low view of Scripture and lack of critical contextualization will lead to syncretism. Syncretism is the fusion of two beliefs, which compromises biblical doctrines. Syncretism happens when culture is allowed to change the biblical message. Such syncretism may happen when the basic content of the gospel is changed by the cultural values of the context.

Syncretism is the reshaping of Christian beliefs and practices through cultural accommodation so that they consciously or unconsciously blend with those of the dominant culture. It is the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses its distinctive nature and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture. Syncretism develops because the Christian community attempts to make its message and life attractive, alluring, and appealing to those outside the fellowship (Van Rheenen, 2003).

This article explicitly deals with a model of contextualization that aims to present the gospel to Muslims. The "C-Scale" or "Contextualization Spectrum" measures on a scale from 1 through 6 the level of contextualization among "Christ-centered Communities" found in the Muslim context (Travis 1988a:407-408). The point of contention is concerning the validity of a C-5 approach.

C-1 Traditional church using outside language.

C-2 Traditional church using inside language.

C-3 Churches using inside language and religiously neutral inside cultural forms such as music, artwork, and ethnic dress.

C-4 Contextualized Christ-centered communities using inside language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms that may include praying with one's arms raised, touching the forehead on the ground while praying, and separating men from women. Believers are aware of the fact that they have become Christians and have joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

C-5 These believers still refer to themselves as Muslims who are followers of Isa the Messiah. The believers still live within the community of Islam, legally, culturally, and religiously. There may be degrees of understanding but some "core teachings" are required for baptism, such as accepting the divinity of Jesus as well as his death and resurrection. Most believe that the

Qur'an is inspired (one of the four "Sacred Books," i.e., *Torah* or Law, *Zabur* or Prophets, *Injil* or Gospel, and Qur'an). Mohammed is still considered to have been a true prophet. However, as his teachings were misunderstood, a remnant must be formed within Islam that will restore the original truths. Some are baptized with no knowledge of the Seventh-day Adventist Church or even without understanding that they are becoming Christians.

C-6 Secret/underground believers who are believed to be Muslims by the Muslim community, and they themselves say that they are Muslims. For sure, this model is far from God's ideal.

In 1993 the Global Mission Issues Committee of the General Conference developed guidelines that were edited by the Biblical Research Institute and brought to the Administrative Committee of the General Conference for approval. Among other things, the guidelines state: "New converts should, as soon as possible, be made aware of the fact that they belong to a particular worldwide ecclesiastical community--the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (Global Mission Issues Committee, 1993). Even though there is no final resolution on this matter, missionaries in different countries are attempting to work under these guidelines and are baptizing non-Christians who do not know of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), and even without acknowledging that they are Christians. This is representative of the C-5 model, under which all Adventist Muslims fall.

The validity of the C-5 approach has been questioned by Christians committed to a high view of Scripture. Phil Parshall, author of six books on Islam and a missionary for 36 years among Muslims in Asia, divides

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the "C-Scale" into two areas: contextualization and syncretism. He places C-1 to C-4 within the contextualization spectrum. "C-1 starts at low contextualization and works up incrementally to C-4 at the high end." He concludes that "C-5 can be placed anywhere along the syncretism spectrum" (1998:405). Even though "Faith Development In Context" (FDIC) ministries (a new name for Adventist efforts using C-5) may reject many Muslim practices and maintain others (such as the observance of *Eid el Adha*, the Islamic feast of sacrifice, according to Whitehouse 1992:32), the fact is that in order to live within the community of Islam, both

legally and socially, an Adventist Muslim must accept Mohammed as a prophet, the Qur'an as an inspired book, and Islam as a true religion. This is a downward path to syncretism.

There are many theological issues behind the C-5 approach that Adventist church leaders, theologians, and missiologists should take into consideration as they review these guidelines and as they study the issue of syncretism. The following are just some of them.

One is the doctrine of inspiration and revelation. Some of the questions that missionaries using a C-5 approach should consider are: Was Mohammed a true prophet? Was he as inspired as Paul? Are there varied levels of inspiration? Should we accept the writings of a self-proclaimed prophet if they contradict previous revelations? A basic principle of hermeneutics leads Christians to believe that New Testament writings expand but do not contradict the Old Testament, and Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen G. White's writings must be tested by the Bible. What about explicit contradictions between the Qur'an and the Bible (especially references to the divinity of Christ and the Trinity)? However, in C-5 Adventist (FDIC) literature there is a recurrent reference to "all the Holy Books," including the Qur'an. Is the Qur'an a holy book in the same sense as the Bible?

Another issue at stake is the doctrine of the Church. The "remnant" concept of the C-5 approach is a radical departure from the traditional understanding of the remnant as a body of believers that has "come out" of their religious community and has identified with a separate and visible group of people who has determined to be loyal to everything God has revealed—the Remnant Church. Advocates of the C-5 approach speak of "God's remnant in various cultures" and of "remnants"—plural (Whitehouse 1993:248, 258). Adventists are part of God's remnant (1992:31). This concept is based on an assumption for which there is no solid biblical support: "Our approach has been to understand that God is calling out within each cultural group a particular people to represent him in that community" (1993:257). Are there "remnants" in other religions? Should Muslims (or Confucians, or Roman Catholics, or Mormons) be encouraged to join the Remnant born in 1844? If we can baptize Muslims who remain Muslims, can we baptize Roman Catholics who will not "come out of Babylon" to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church? The C-5 approach reduces the church to what Islam can reasonably tolerate; this is an erosion of Christianity and of the Adventist faith, and an open form of syncretism. It also threatens the unity of the church. With the existence of baptized believers who have not reached a complete awareness of the Adventist faith and have not developed a full fellowship with

other sister communities in the world, the stage has been set for a fragmented world church.

The doctrine of baptism itself is in question. Can we baptize a person who still considers himself or herself to be a Muslim? Believers in a C-5 model consider themselves part of the Muslim remnant. Should we baptize a person who still believes that Mohammed was a true prophet? Muslim background believers maintain that Islam is a true religion, that Mohammed was

has ethical implications related to hiding truth. This statement is also in direct contradiction to the "Baptismal Guidelines" outlined in the same document, which refer to guidelines for "the preparation of new converts for baptism and membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church."

Can we baptize a person who does not know and accept all 28 fundamental doctrines? Are there doctrines that are not core beliefs? Who determines what is "core" and what is "fringe"? If a belief

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a true prophet, and that the Qur'an is an inspired book but that at some point Muslims misunderstood them. The *Guidelines for engaging in Global Mission* referred to above open the door for the baptism of believers who are not aware of the full implications of baptism. The phrase, "New converts should, as soon as possible, be made aware of the fact that they belong to . . . the Seventh-day Adventist Church"

is not "core," should we require SDAs everywhere to believe it?

The baptism of a person who does not understand the gospel or the requirements of the gospel would be incongruent with the teachings of the Bible, the guidelines of the Spirit of Prophecy, and the explicit instructions of the *Church manual.* Jesus said, "Teaching them to observe all things which I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). Ellen G. White

admonishes, "Bring the requirements of the gospel to bear upon the candidates for baptism" (1948, 6:95). The *Church manual* instructs, "The minister's work is not complete until he has thoroughly instructed the candidates, and they are familiar with and committed to all fundamental beliefs and related practices of the church and are prepared to assume the responsibilities of church membership" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2000:30). Lack of proper indoctrination will unavoidably lead a new believer to different forms of syncretism.

I do not see problems in meeting Muslims where they are. The use of "Qur'anic thought patterns" to explain biblical truths (Whitehouse 1992:32) is one example of how missionaries can help Muslims to understand the gospel in ways that make sense to them. Other strategies adopting cultural (C-3) and Islamic forms (C-4) should be experimented with; Muslim believers can become Adventist Muslims (C-4) without compromising the integrity of biblical truth. The option to become Muslim Adventists (C-5) falls within the realm of syncretism. It has been argued that "Christians in Muslim contexts need to retain some kind of relationship with the mosque if they are to witness" (Doss 2005:29). However, "Christians outwardly remaining Muslims in order to reach Muslims (i.e., C-5 missionaries) is a step beyond simply urging new believers to remain in the religious community of their birth" (Travis 1998:413).

Acceptance of C-5 for pragmatic reasons is dangerous. This contextualized approach has been proven to produce results in terms of baptisms; however, it is also true that it has resulted in the creation of something close to an Adventist offshoot within Islam, a "parallel" movement, a separate organization, and a religious group that is not connected with the visible Remnant Church.

The current *Guidelines for engaging in Global Mission* contain contradictions and theological flaws. The Global Mission Issues Committee should provide revised guidelines, a framework for trying new methods, and alternative approaches within the parameters of a sound theological framework. Adventist efforts among Muslims must avoid syncretism. Missionaries may use the Qur'an in initial stages in order to bring a person little by little to an understanding of the gospel but they should not baptize a Muslim who is still on a C-5 level in the "C-Scale." Missionaries should also have the clear objective of bringing believers with a Muslim background to full fellowship with the world church. I propose the elimination of the phrase "as soon as possible" in the "Guidelines for engaging in Global Mission" and replacing it with the concept that "*prior to baptism*, new converts should be made aware of the fact that they are joining a particular

worldwide ecclesiastical community—the Seventh-day Adventist Church."

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