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Contextualized Discipleship Ministries: Problematic, Legitimate, Imperative?

From inception the Seventh-day Adventist Church has taken Jesus' command to take the gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people very seriously. A century and a half later we can only praise God for the results. The Adventist Church is the most widespread Protestant ecclesial body with over 16 million members in 203 countries and areas of the world, and with ministries that span 891 languages, including nearly 8,000 schools of all levels and over 65,000 churches (Vyhmeister 2000:1, 2; Ryan 2007:ix-xiii).

Yet, even as Christians celebrate the goodness of God, it is clear that challenges remain. Significant non-Christian population groups, especially within the 10/40 Window, remain largely un-reached (Wagner, Peters, and Wilson 1995:17; Ryan 2007:x). Traditional evangelistic approaches so successful in other contexts have failed to make a substantial impact resulting in small numbers of conversions. Historical and practical considerations mean that Christianity may be viewed with suspicion and as a potential threat to the established order of society. As a consequence, even the few who accept the Advent message are often ostracized by their communities thus limiting their potential to make a further impact for the gospel.

In an attempt to break the impasse, missiologists have developed various models of contextualization whereby the gospel can be presented in language and forms that are recognizable and acceptable by the groups being evangelized (Hulbert and Mulholland 1975:85-86). John Travis developed the C1-C6 spectrum to categorize contextual approaches which we summarize here.

C1 is a typical church congregation transplanted from another country that uses the language of the culture of origin.

C2 is a C1 congregation that uses the local language but makes no at-

tempt at culturally sensitive modes of expression.

C3 is a C2 congregation which uses local cultural norms (e.g., music, dress, art).

C4 is a C3 congregation that has adopted biblically acceptable religious practices and forms from the local culture. C4 believers may not openly identify as Christians but nonetheless, have a Christian identity.

C5 is a much like a C4 but differs in the question of self-identity. C5 ministries can take different forms but a key identifier is that believers do not see themselves as Christians but rather retain the overall identity of their respective religious communities. C5 ministries have also been known by other names. I have opted to call them Contextualized Discipleship (CD) in the sense that discipleship takes place in context and outside the boundaries which identify a ministry as Christian. I will use this term henceforth. The focus of this study is on C5 approaches from a distinctly Adventist perspective.

C6 refers to secret believers with possibly a blurred identity. This study will not address C6 believers (Travis 1995:407-408).

C1-C4 approaches do not pose major theological or administrative challenges. Though successful among some non-Christian groups, they have had minimal impact on others. CD approaches, by contrast, have shown great potential to reach some of the world's largest unreached people groups. But they have also raised considerable theological and administrative controversy (Whitehouse 2007:199-200).

The point that seems to make CD approaches both successful and controversial is the question of identity (Whitehouse 2005:98-99). C1-C4 entails a person accepting biblical truth *and* making the decision to become an Adventist, even though this identity might not be made public. While the outward forms of C1-C4 retain some of the pre-Christian cultural flavor provided such flavor does not contradict the Bible, new believers are fully aware that they have joined the Adventist faith. A radical shift in self-identity has occurred. By contrast, a CD believer will accept all fundamental tenets of Adventism, including, of course, a faith in the salvific efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus, but will not take on a Christian identity. Indeed, such a change of identity may not even be offered as an option. Rather, the believer will retain the previous identity and will consider the new faith a legitimate expression of the host religious culture. The CD believer therefore remains within the religio-cultural context and retains the nomenclature of the surrounding community, yet manifests faith forms and a lifestyle that is decidedly Adventist (McGavran 1974:46-49).

The C5/CD model obviously entails a paradox: a believer who looks like an Adventist but who is not one in name or formal affiliation, and may not care to become one. No wonder the topic has aroused considerable

debate. I would like to propose that if the goal of evangelism (Chaney and Watson 1993:132-139) is to bring people into full communion with and membership in the Adventist Church, then C1-C4 ministries are the only legitimate ministries.

Nonetheless, the question needs to be asked: Is there room for ministries that do not lead to full membership in the Adventist Church? And if yes, is there room for CD ministries? I believe that the answer to both questions is a resounding yes. I would like to propose that CD ministries are not only legitimate, but imperative. They are a God-given tool to bring the great commission to successful completion in these last days before the return of Jesus (Dybdahl 1999:54-61).

To support this thesis the present study will be divided into three sections. First, it will examine CD ministries from a biblical basis. Second, church history and Adventist ecclesiology will be brought to bear. Finally, I will propose a possible ecclesiological framework for CD operations that will not compromise the integrity and unity of the Adventist Church.

In the discussion I will often use the following terminology:

CD believer(s)—Individuals who have accepted the tenets of the Adventist faith but remain within their non-Christian socio-religious context.

CD ministries—Adventist ministries that work to establish CD believers.

CD movement—CD believers who are of sufficient numbers and unity to be described as a movement.

Host Culture/Religion—The non-Christian culture and/or religion in which a CD ministry operates.

Establishing a Biblical Background

Most studies that are supportive of CD ministries attempt to build a biblical case on a sampling of texts from Acts or Paul's epistles, especially the Corinthian correspondence (McVay 2005:49-54). Instead, I will approach the issue by examining three very pertinent case studies in ascending order of relevance.

First Case Study—God and the Nations

The Bible is a history of God's interaction with his people. Yet, interspersed in between are glimpses of God's interactions with the nations and population groups who were not formally part of God's covenants with his people (Vogels 1979:39-72). A foremost observation about such groups is that the God who cares about the sparrows (Luke 12:6) and the lilies (Matt 6:28-30) also cares intensely about the nations, about their moral and physical well-being (Matt 5:45). He also expects certain standards of

behavior. Though they might not have direct access to the will of God as revealed in Scripture, nonetheless they are accountable (Rom 1:19-21). For example, God determines to punish Amalek (Deut 25:17, 19) for attacking the weak in Israel, Babylon for oppressing other nations (Hab 2:8), Sodom because her sin was very great (Gen 18:20), and Nineveh because of her evil ways (Jonah 1:2).

Conversely, because God does not desire death or suffering for the wicked (Ezek 33:11), God communicates with the nations calling them to repentance. God decides to give the Amorites four generations to see whether they will repent or fill the cup of wickedness (Gen 15:16). Before he destroys Sodom he declares that even if ten people have repented he will spare the city (Gen 18:32). While he does not find ten in Sodom, he does in Nineveh and decides to gladly spare it (Jonah 4:11).

God does not wait indifferently to see the fate of nations. Rather, he takes initiatives to draw them to himself (Vogels 1979:39-50). The Bible looked forward to the day when Gentiles could come into full fellowship of the covenant (Isa 56:3-7). This incoming was often associated with the advent of the Messiah (Isa 42:1, 6; 43:9, 10; 52:10, 15; Zech 14:16). In anticipation Israel was to minister to the nations. Thus prophets wrote oracles about Moab (e.g., Isa 15:1-16:14; Jer 48:1-47; Ezek 28:8-13), Edom (e.g., Isa 34:1-17; Jer 49:7-22; Ezek 25:12-15), the Philistines (Ezek 25:15-17), and others. Of Jeremiah the Lord said, "I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5).

When God worked out his mighty works, it was at least in part to inspire the nations: "We have heard" said the Canaanite Rahab to the two spies, and then lists some of the mighty acts of God concluding "the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh 2:10-11). This was a sentiment shared by the Gibeonites (Josh 9:24). The plagues in Egypt served, at least partly, an evangelistic purpose (Exod 8:19a; Asumbrado 2009:68-69; Kaiser 1978:103). In the dedication of the temple Solomon offered a special prayer for foreigners who might visit the temple after hearing of God's great name (1 Kgs 8:41-43), a sentiment echoed by Isa 56:7. The traders congregated in the court of the Gentiles thereby hindering the fulfillment of Solomon's and Isaiah's words and that was at least partly the reason that Jesus expelled them (Mark 11:17).

In the Middle Ages Jews developed the concept of Noahide laws, a minimum of ethical behavior God expects of non-believers. While the concept of Noahide laws is not biblical, the principle of ethical behavior for those outside the covenant is.

What is seen in the above examples is clear divine concern for the well-being of those who are not formally under God's covenant, not part of God's people. God not only holds them accountable, but takes concrete

steps to enlighten them even as they are apart from his covenant. It follows that any ministry that brings non-Christian peoples closer to God even as they remain outside God's covenant, is in harmony with this biblical outlook (Martin 1998:157-161). CD ministries do at least that and in that respect should be seen as biblically legitimate.

Second Case Study—God and Individual Gentiles

Building on the above examples of God's concern for the nations, we note that in the Bible there are multiple examples of individuals who came to levels of faith, often deep levels that included a relationship with God, who were outside the immediate bounds of the covenant.

Isaac's brother-in-law, Laban, acknowledged God but also worshipped idols (Gen 24:31; 31:19). When Jacob's time to be married came, his mother insisted that he not marry one of the pagan Canaanite girls, but seek a wife among Laban's compromised but still partly faithful, non-Israelite family (Gen 27:46–28:3). Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a priest in the Gentile nation of Midian (Exod 3:1). He was not part of the establishment of the covenant in Sinai, did not join Israel, and presumably did not know or follow the full legal and cultic arrangement that God gave through Moses that became Israel's covenant constitution. Balaam lived far in the east (Num 22:5) and was not an Israelite. While his end was tragic, at some point he enjoyed a close relationship with God and had the prophetic gift (Num 22:9). Naaman was a high ranking Syrian who came to faith via the ministry of a young servant girl and the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 5:1-3, 15). He acknowledged the God of heaven and became his worshipper, but there is no evidence that he formally joined the people of Israel, or traveled to Jerusalem to offer the appointed sacrifices. To do so, would probably have been regarded as high treason. Yet, the biblical record clearly accords him a place among the faithful of the ages (2 Kgs 5:19; Luke 4:27).

The wise men who visited baby Jesus were from a pagan background. They stood out from their co-religionists by being "upright men who studied the indications of Providence in nature" (White 1940:59). Through providence and the study of the prophecies of Balaam they eventually studied the Hebrew Scriptures and received a clearer view of the coming Deliverer. They are counted among the faithful and even received a direct revelation from God (Matt 2:12). Yet there is no evidence that they joined the Hebrew faith initially or the Christian church later (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 1959:5:288).

An especially interesting story appears in Acts 19:1-7. While visiting Ephesus during his third missionary journey, Paul meets twelve disciples (Acts 19:1, 7). When he inquires whether they have received the Holy Spirit, they reply that they "have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit"

(Acts 19:2); they had only received the baptism of John (Acts 19:4). On hearing this, Paul baptizes them again in the name of Jesus, prays over them, and they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:5-6).

Two things stand out in this story: (1) their spiritual experience was genuine; (2) but it was also incomplete and experienced outside the new covenant community, the Christian Church. The fact that their spiritual experience was genuine is evident in that Luke describes them as “disciples” (Acts 19:1), a term reserved in Acts only for followers of Jesus. But their experience was also incomplete because they had not been baptized in the name of Jesus and had not even heard of the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist died about AD 28 (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 1959:5:40). Paul met these disciples in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, that is, around AD 53 or 54 (Wenham and Walton 2001:286). This means that for more than 25 years these men had a vibrant and valid but nonetheless, incomplete spiritual experience *apart* from the main body of the church. It is not unreasonable to surmise that these were not the only persons who came to faith through John’s ministry and to a maturity of understanding and membership in the Christian Church years or decades later. Indeed, some may have died in faith, without ever having gone through the experience that these twelve men did.

It is also worth noting their number—twelve. Is this a coincidence? In the Bible twelve represents the rulership and authority of God (e.g., Gen 35:22; Exod 24:4; 28:21; Ezek 8:24; Jer 56:20; Matt 10:1; Acts 1:15-26; Rev 12:1; 21:12-24). Now in Acts 19:1-7 we meet twelve believers with incomplete faith living outside the formal bounds of the people of God. Could it be that they are representatives of a people of God outside the people of God? Of people who live in the light they have received but yet whose light is dim and incomplete?

What we have in the above cases is ministry that brings people to faith but not into immediate or full membership in the covenant community. Rather, such faith is born and develops *in context* (Martin 1998:448), but apart from the people of God. Like CD ministries, the aim of God’s ministry to these individuals was not a specific association or identity but a gradual maturing of faith. CD ministries develop faith in context outside the immediate covenant community as Adventists traditionally understand it and in this sense parallel closely God’s ministry to these Bible individuals. As such, CD ministries continue in the path of a long and noble biblical tradition.

Third Case Study—Jonah and Nineveh

The third and most pertinent case study is the story of Jonah and Nineveh. I believe that this is the clearest biblical example of a full-blown

CD ministry. The facts are as follows. Nineveh was a very wicked city (Jonah 1:2), but in it were “many who were reaching out after something better and higher, and who, if granted opportunity to learn of the living God, would put away their evil deeds and worship Him” (White 1943:265, 266). God chose Jonah to minister to Nineveh, but initially he did not want to go. Why? Jonah 4:2, 10-11 suggest that he feared for his reputation and felt no real love for the people (Hasel 1976:12-15). Ellen White adds that the mission seemed impossible and suggests that dread also played a part (White 1943:266). With Assyria being the dominant power and a political bully in the region, it is not hard to understand why.

Once in Nineveh Jonah’s ministry was unconventional and patchy. Though the city was large, “a three-days journey in extent” (Jonah 3:3), Jonah labored for only one day (3:4). His message was simple, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4). Ellen White notes that as a result God’s “law was revered” (1943:271), a statement that might suggest that Jonah’s message was more encompassing. Nonetheless, there seems to have been nothing said about God’s forgiving power, the sacrificial system foreshadowing the coming of the Deliverer, circumcision, the covenant, the details of the Mosaic Law. There is no evidence that Nineveh came into any formal administrative relationship with Jerusalem or that they were somehow incorporated into Israel, the people of God. If Jonah’s ministry was placed on Travis’ spectrum, it would have to be expanded to incorporate a C7 or C8 model of contextualizing, because Jonah’s ministry went well beyond the C5 model. Yet, Jonah’s ministry pleased God (Jonah 4:11).

The extent of this success is hard to miss. One day’s ministry brought a city of 120,000 people to repentance. This is forty times the number converted at Pentecost! While not every one of these 120,000 necessarily repented to salvation, the success was nonetheless phenomenal. Jesus proclaimed Nineveh’s response as more favorable than the response of the crowds to his own ministry (Luke 11:32). We can legitimately speak of a Ninevite Reformation, a movement that lasted for some time (White 1943:363).

Did Jonah’s ministry offer only temporal release from threatened physical destruction? Or did it have eternal consequences? In Matt 12:41 and Luke 11:32, Jesus spoke of the Ninevites who will rise up (*anastēsontai*) in the Day of Judgment because they repented (*metenoēsan*) at the message of Jonah. The verb *metenoēsan* implies a true conversion and change of heart as opposed to a temporary change of behavior to avert a temporal disaster, while *anastēsontai* points to the resurrection of the righteous. It appears therefore that Jonah’s ministry, (1) brought temporal salvation from earthly destruction to all inhabitants and (2) brought eternal salva-

tion for at least some of the Ninevites.

It is hard to miss the parallels between Jonah's ministry and CD ministries: (1) the sinfulness of the city; (2) the large numbers looking for something better; (3) the hesitancy of leaders within the covenant community to tackle the need in creative ways; (4) the great success of the mission; (5) the non-conformist, incomplete, even syncretistic outlook of the resultant reform movement; and (6) the lack of formal/administrative bonds of the Nineveh Reformation to the Israelite covenant community. Jonah's ministry is truly an example of a CD movement.

Let us summarize the discussion on biblical precedents. In the first Case Study God's interest in the well-being of the Gentile nations in OT times was discussed, which indicates that even though such nations may not have placed themselves under God's covenant in a saving relationship, God still expected standards of morality and behavior from them and ministered actively through his chosen people to uphold such standards. CD ministries, by promoting faith in Jesus and upholding God's law, uphold such moral standards among the nations. CD ministries are therefore legitimate.

From the second Case Study, the examples of Gentiles who experienced vibrant faith *apart* from God's covenant community was noted, pointing out that salvific ministry does not always lead to membership in the visible organized family of God's people, at least not immediately. While the natural goal of all evangelistic ministries is baptism and church membership (Martin 1998:459-461), God's Spirit retains the freedom to work beyond ecclesial boundaries. Where societal factors render church membership unrealistic the church should not presume to limit the scope of operations and efficacy of the Holy Spirit on the basis of confessional statements.

Most importantly, in the third Case Study, Jonah's ministry to Nineveh, an example is given of a full blown CD ministry in operation. This story tells of intense contextualization that faces internal opposition from the sending organization, that launches on the command of God, that faces phenomenal success, and that leads to a reform movement not directly attached to the mother organization, yet one that prepares people for the heavenly kingdom.

The uniting factor behind all these and many other biblical examples is that God wants all peoples to experience the blessings that come from a close walk with him. This is experienced in greatest fullness within the bounds of the covenant he has established in full fellowship and harmony with his people. However, God cares even for nations and individuals far removed from his people and his covenant. Any ministry that helps bring these prodigals closer to God's ideal is legitimate. Adventist CD ministries

do just that and are therefore legitimate, irrespective of whether the end product fits neatly into the parameters set out in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1971:46-67).

CD Ministries and Adventist Ecclesiology

Some critics object that CD ministries entail syncretism (Hulbert and Mulholland 1975:86, 67). The point is debatable, but let us assume it for the sake of argument. We should also agree that many of the practices and doctrines prevalent among Christian churches today, when viewed from the Adventist perspective, are also syncretistic. Two stand out: Sunday keeping and belief in the immortality of the soul. Both have ancient origins. Indeed the latter repeats the lie of the serpent to Eve (Gen 3:4). These two syncretistic doctrines will play a major negative part in the final stages of the Great Controversy (White 1950:588). With these introductory thoughts let us proceed to examine four case studies.

Case Study 1—Adventist Spiritual Heritage

The *Great Controversy* lists a multitude of individuals and movements that Adventists consider as their spiritual ancestors: the Waldenses, John Wycliff and the Lollards, William Tyndale, John Huss, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Zwingli, John Knox, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer, the Huguenots, the Wesleys, and many more. Nearly all were Sunday keepers and most believed in the immortality of the soul, that is, they were syncretistic Christians. Furthermore, some believed in absolute or partial predestination, most did not practice adult baptism, some believed in consubstantiation and several persecuted other Christians who did not conform to their version of faith.

Two questions come to mind. First, when God called these individuals or groups, was he not engaging in a CD ministry? How many of these noble men and women would fit the fullness of truth as Adventists understand it? Yet God, seemingly oblivious to the shortcomings of their faith, dips his hands into the mire that was medieval spirituality and theological darkness, and in a process of recreation takes hold of men and women who, like the Ninevites of old, longed for something better, and begins the long process of the restoration of truth. This is precisely what a CD ministry is all about, meeting people where they are and leading them into the path of truth, one step at a time, as far as they are able to follow, as slowly or quickly as they are able to move. Not an inch further, not a second faster. Second, if God waited hundreds of years to restore the light of truth in fullness (Prov 4:18) within the Christian world, why is it that we expect an immediate, all or nothing approach among non-Christian population groups?

The history of the Reformation, which Adventists treasure, points to the fact that (1) God is involved in CD ministries, and (2) that in the process of the restoration of truth, every step in the right direction is a step in the right direction and therefore a blessing not a problem. CD ministries are valid because they move people in the right direction. CD ministries are legitimate because they are modeled on God's way of doing things!

Case Study 2—Adventists and Contemporary Protestantism

Adventists point proudly to the Protestant heritage and view themselves as part of the Protestant family and sometimes bend over backwards to demonstrate that they are *bona fide* evangelicals. Adventists annually spend thousands of dollars to send ministers to training seminars run by other churches. Ellen White advises that we should pray with and for other ministers and notes that many of God's children are still in other churches. Indeed, we believe that only as probation nears its close will many of them join the Advent movement. The above indicates that we consider other Protestants churches as places where legitimate spiritual experiences might develop and where God's Spirit is at work despite their theological shortcomings (*Questions on Doctrine* 1957:186-196).

This raises an important question: How is it that we can view a fellow Protestant who may eat unclean meats, drink wine, disregard the Sabbath, believe in once-saved-always-saved, pronounce the moral law abolished, believe in the immortality of the soul, and probably consider Adventism a cult, as a *bona fide* believer, but at the same time view one who holds all fundamental beliefs of Adventism as not a legitimate believer because he also recites the *shahadah* and reads the Qur'an?

The syllogism defies logic. Christians seem to have developed a demarcation line, artificial in many ways, between Christianity and all other religions. Perversions of the gospel may thus be readily accepted because they come under the cloak of the former; while legitimate Nineveh-style spiritual aspirations among the latter are rejected because the title "Christian" is not attached to them. Adventists should never fall into this trap. My assertion is that if we are to accept our fellow Protestants as brothers and sisters in Christ, we should extend an even warmer embrace to CD believers who, though they may not carry the title Christian, have come to a saving relationship with Jesus and follow the ways of truth often better than many Christians.

Case Study 3—Adventists and Outside Truth Movements

A third case study considers the spread of "Adventist" beliefs outside the immediate parameters of Adventism. Even as the Adventist Church

is growing fast, doctrines associated with Adventism have been making headway outside the Adventist Church. For example, today there are over 400 Sabbath-keeping congregations or small denominations. In the Anglican community there has been considerable discussion on hell and the afterlife with several prominent theologians taking a stance for conditional immortality. Should we bemoan the fact that such groups have not converted *en masse* to Adventism? Or should we rejoice that “our” doctrines are making headway in non-Adventist circles? The answer is too obvious to require elaboration.

If we rejoice when non-Adventists accept “Adventist” doctrines, why not rejoice when non-Christians accept even more through a CD ministry? Yes, CD believers may exemplify an incomplete faith or even elements of syncretism; but so do many non-Adventists who are accepting “Adventist” doctrines. Why rejoice in the spiritual growth of the latter and bemoan the spiritual growth of the former? CD ministries spread our faith outside the confines of the Adventist Church in ways no other ministry has managed to do in the past century and a half. Rather than be troubled by the growth of CD ministries, we have every reason to rejoice.

Case Study 4—Other Adventist “CD” Ministries

One last case study should seal the case that CD ministries are in harmony with the Adventist ethos. Over the years Adventists have run a number of ministries that aim to better the physical and spiritual life of others without church membership as the end goal. A classic example is the 5-Day Plan to Stop Smoking (McFarland and Folkenberg 1964:93). Thousands of these have been run among Christians and non-Christians alike. For some, such programs have started them along a path that eventually led to church membership. For the vast majority, however, a plan to stop smoking was just that, a plan to stop smoking. The creators of the Plan skillfully worked into it messages about God in the hope that even if participants did not join the church, they would nonetheless connect with God.

A similar philosophy motivates welfare projects. When Adventists operate relief and development projects in societies closed to the gospel, open evangelization is out of the picture. Yet there is always the hope that the Adventist ethos reflected in everyday interactions will serve as a molding influence, a silent witness to the efficacy of the gospel. We do not expect that such witness will bring others to church membership, but rather that it will sow seeds that may germinate in the heart of non-Christians a clearer picture of God, a better understanding of the plan of salvation, and a greater respect for Jesus *within* their respective cultural and religious contexts.

Media broadcasts operate in a similar way. When the Advent message is broadcast in societies closed to the gospel the church can hope that at best only a minuscule fraction of listeners or viewers will come out and openly join the Adventist Church. But there is the expectation that a much larger number will either accept Jesus quietly and secretly, or that they will accept some of the biblical truths and form a more biblical worldview *within* their respective cultural and religious context.

What I am saying is that 5-Day Plans to Stop Smoking, relief and development projects, media programming broadcast into closed societies, and other related ministries are in essence CD ministries, even if the church does not call them so. They are CD ministries because they aim to develop faith *in context*, a faith that may never mature into formal church membership. I therefore assert that if it is legitimate to teach someone to stop smoking, to love God, to read the Bible, or the many other things different ministries teach even as that person remains nominally a non-Christian, it is perfectly legitimate to teach that person all the fundamental beliefs and offer baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit even if that person remains *nominally* a non-Christian.

The Question of Identity: Parallel, Transitional, or Autonomous?

In the first two parts it was noted that CD ministries are in harmony with the Bible and Adventist ecclesiology. They operate on the foundational truth that God wants to impact the lives of all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, since they are all his children (Dederen 2000:545). Indeed, Adventists more than most Christians recognize that God is at work everywhere, even in the spiritually darkest recesses of this world where the gospel has hardly ever made an open impact. In such an enlightened outlook, why is there opposition to CD ministries?

I believe that the answer lies in the word "identity." Not the identity of CD believers, but our identity as Adventists. Over the last 160 years the Adventist Church has grown into a very tightly knit and unified spiritual community, with a clearly defined faith and a sharp understanding of its eschatological role (Whitehouse 2005:97-118).

It is this self-identity that is threatened by CD ministries. When faith is developed in a non-Christian context and remains in theologically elemental stages we can praise the Lord because it does not threaten our self-understanding; however, when such faith reaches a more mature theological level and includes baptism but is not accompanied by church membership, the Adventist self-identity is challenged. Are CD believers Adventists? If yes, why do they not join the church? If not, why are they baptized? The real question therefore is how to relate to people who are like us but not part of us, especially when we are the ones who have

brought them to this point. That this is the main issue is evident by how often critics quote the *Church Manual*. How often do we quote the *Church Manual* when we discuss the validity of the faith of other Christians? The issue is not whether CD believers are legitimate believers. The real issue is how we should relate to them. It concerns our, not their, identity.

This tension is reflected in the terminology we use in relation to CD movements. Two terms stand out. The term “transitional structures” (General Conference 2009:A 15) implies that a CD ministry is a transitional entity, which at some point will be brought into full church membership. It implies that the church attempts to monitor and control all developments closely. This language reflects the issues with our identity. The term “transitional structures” implies an approach whereby we feel that we cannot allow these people to be nearly Adventists; we must take action sooner or later to bring them fully within the fold.

Such nomenclature is more detrimental than helpful. At a grass roots level within the Adventist Church it may encourage fragmentation by giving rise to other ministries that are not fully conformant to church polity as expressed in the *Church Manual*. Furthermore, transitional structures raise serious issues on an administrative level. If CD structures are transitional, at what point should the transition be made? How quickly should that transition be made, and how should it be carried out? Are we diluting our identity if we do not move promptly to “transition” CD believers into full membership?

The concept of “transitional” is also problematic for CD identity. At what point should CD believers be told that they have become Adventists even though they were not aware of it? Will they feel cheated at not knowing the full truth of their new identity from the beginning? Will some turn against the faith they initially embraced? Furthermore, transitional structures can cause problems with religious and/or government authorities. If CD ministries are simply a facade to Christianize non-Christian population groups, they are liable to be considered clandestine and subversive. This may in turn not only harm such ministries, but also the official church structures in the host culture. The concept of transitional structures has multiple problems and functions more to satisfy our desire to see CD believers join the Adventist Church than to meet the needs of the CD believers themselves.

Another term used for CD organizational structures is “parallel” structures (Bauer 2005:292-305; Wiklander 2006:143). This term is better than “transitional” in that it allows for an ongoing existence of a CD movement, parallel to that of the Adventist Church and without a clear point whereby it must make a full transition into the Adventist family. But the concept of a parallel movement or parallel structures is also problematic.

It implies that the Adventist Church acts as an ongoing model and overseer and that administrative connections continue, with the result that some of the above problems outlined in relation to transitional structures continue albeit to a lesser extent.

It appears to me that the best way to relate to CD movements that might develop out of CD ministries is to see them as autonomous entities with autonomous structures relevant to the context in which they develop. CD believers cannot conform fully to the Adventist outlook and attempting to force an administrative relation will cause friction on both ends. Nineveh can serve as a model. Jonah began the ministry there. As the people responded to his message a reform movement was born headed by the king that did not peter out immediately. What forms and structures this movement developed we do not know. But one thing is clear; there was no administrative connection to Jerusalem or Samaria.

Using the Nineveh model and relating to CD movements as autonomous movements carries certain advantages. First, it allows a CD movement to develop administrative structures that are most practical for the societal context in which it operates. The four tiered centralized format that has proved very effective for the Adventist Church might not be an optimum model in a non-Christian context. CD autonomy allows for flexibility and adaptability.

Second, a CD movement can mature naturally as an insider movement without external considerations playing a formative role throughout the process. In other words, the movement can morph into its environment without constantly asking whether such morphing is acceptable to Adventist leaders who are completely detached from the movement.

Third, as a mature insider movement, CD can operate without any fear of being “discovered” or exposed. A CD movement with a strong autonomous identity can legitimately claim to represent the culture in which it operates, as opposed to being a camouflaged Christian infiltration attempt.

Conversely, an administratively autonomous CD movement also carries certain dangers. The greatest is that the host culture and outlook might water down the biblical worldview leading to a syncretistic movement that eventually loses its reforming power. Moving forward with the gospel into uncharted waters always entails certain dangers and history provides many examples of the power of the gospel being compromised through accommodation. However, the potential gains for the gospel by moving forward despite dangers far outweigh the loss of waiting passively by the wayside in the hope that closed population groups will one day open up to more traditional C1 to C4 approaches; or even of moving into a CD ministry direction but making the CD ministry administratively

dependent on processes and structures in another part of the world that may have little understanding of realities on the ground. Building CD ministries that can lead to autonomous Advent insider movements gives the highest freedom for the Holy Spirit to create beautiful things among people groups long considered unreachable (Bauer 2007:245-261). The contemporary Christian scene provides examples of just such successful endeavors (e.g., Jews for Jesus).

There will obviously be a certain level of osmosis between an autonomous CD movement and the Adventist Church. Adventists who feel called to CD ministries will move across and provide leadership at different levels within CD movements. Conversely, CD believers who develop a mature theological understanding and can see beyond the immediate structures to the broader picture of the work of God in the world may move over to the Adventist Church on an individual basis and as circumstances allow. Open cooperation between the two bodies can be encouraged wherever practicable. But the Adventist Church and a CD movement can continue to move in parallel directions but in administrative autonomy of each other.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed case studies from the Bible and from church history. Are CD movements problematic? In a sense yes, because a CD believer may not conform fully to the expectations Adventists have of a mature believer. Are CD ministries legitimate? The answer is a resounding yes. While the CD believer may not reach the level of theological maturity and understanding we would hope for, the Bible and church history provide us with a host of examples of people touched by the Holy Spirit and favored by God who nonetheless did not have full theological or doctrinal maturity. The key factor is not whether a person has reached full doctrinal understanding but rather to recognize that CD ministries meet people in a context of minimal biblical understanding and guide them carefully through biblical truth to a living relationship with the heavenly Father. It is this movement from darkness to light, from ignorance to relationship that makes CD ministries legitimate, not the perfection of the end product.

Are CD ministries imperative? The answer is another resounding yes. The great commission commands us to take the gospel to *every* nation, tribe, language, and people. C1 to C4 models are the most appropriate biblically speaking and should be pursued with vigor wherever practicable. But in contexts where such models bring no fruit, Adventists must move creatively and pursue models that will work. CD ministries have proven effective in adverse circumstances and therefore have become not only legitimate, but imperative if the church is to fulfill the gospel commission.

Today there are many Ninevehs scattered around the globe. Outside they look sinful, decadent, corrupt, and spiritually blind, but within them, just like in the Nineveh of old, thousands of individuals are longing for something better. More than ever we need people like Jonah who, however hesitantly, will take the big step, move outside their comfort zone, use non-conformist approaches to give birth to movements that may themselves be non-conformist, and which may never join the official Adventist Church, but will satisfy the spiritual hunger of the precious souls that are searching, and bring them to a saving relationship with their Creator. To satisfy that need is a gospel imperative. If we do not move with the Spirit, we are failing our call and God will not hesitate to use others who are willing to move.

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