

# Adventist Responses to Mission Challenges through Theology and Contextualization

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By Jon L. Dybdahl

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Over the past several years I have been thinking there was a need to redefine theology, particularly in multi-cultural environments such as we find in the church. Current definitions seemed abstract and not helpful. I have also been burdened about contextualization, which is the framing and explaining of what we teach in a way other cultures can readily understand. It seemed so hard to teach contextualization in a way that its validity and necessity was accepted. Eventually it dawned on me that the hesitance about contextualization was based on an assumed definition of theology. Theology, for many

Adventists is doctrine, especially doctrinal truth. Truth is important to us and truth does not change. I can even remember in my boyhood hearing my parents and grandparents use the term “the truth” as a synonym for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its belief system. While that terminology has to a large extent died out, much of that feeling remains. For many, contextualization seemed to question that truth and was thus threatening. My conviction grew that, at least in part, this dilemma could be solved by a lucid understanding of the meaning of theology, doctrine, and Scripture. A clear definition of theology seemed to be the key.

My feelings that a clearer definition of theology is needed were strongly confirmed by my time in Nigeria during the summer of 2007. As part of the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program for the thirty-four students from the West-Central Africa Division each co-learner was asked to do an introductory chapter describing themselves, their culture, spiritual gifts, leadership style, etc., but also their theology as it related to their project. The description of themselves was no trouble



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for them. On the other hand, for many the theology part left them with question marks. What did this strange American mean? Further discussion revealed that for them theology was the package of Adventist beliefs and doctrines that they held to. That package was not up for change. They understood that package but wondered how it applied to their topics such as ministering to AIDS sufferers, dealing with Muslims, and designing people group specific Bible studies.

On reflection, I decided to do a lecture defining theology (as well as contextualization) along the lines I had been thinking. It seemed to work and so I share some of those ideas in this article.

### **Definition of Theology and Contextualization**

Probably the closest to a definitive or generally accepted definition of theology would be the one proposed in *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Rice 1985:2). This volume is widely used in Adventist colleges and universities to teach Seventh-day Adventist doctrine and theology. It suggests that theology has two basic meanings; it summarizes what Seventh-day Adventists believe and it also attempts to examine these beliefs in a careful and methodical way. This definition seems to equate theology with a summary and examination of doctrine. It is clear that many, including many of my African (and Global North) col-

leagues have internalized the first part of the definition. That also means that the second part of the definition is simply taken to mean that we accept this body of beliefs and use theology to examine it.

While this definition may work in some mono-cultural settings, it is inadequate for a multi-cultural world church and in particular for the African church. Due to time constraints, I will not elaborate on my critique of this definition, but rather propose a new one with the reasons for it and demonstrate how this is so crucial for Africa and African theology.

I suggest that theology is prayerful, reflective application of biblical content to a specific situation. In connection with this definition, a number of points can be made.

#### *Theology Is Devotional and Faith Based*

There is a reason for the word *prayerful*. While *atheist theologians* may exist in the global north, in cultures immersed in the supernatural, they do not make sense. True theology is done in the context of a heart of devotion and relies on the work of the Holy Spirit to guide and lead. The same Spirit that inspired the Bible leads the mind in theology. God's guidance is prayerfully sought.

#### *Theology Employs Reason and Time for Thought*

Theology employs reason and allows time for thought. That is the implication of the word *reflective*. While theology is faith-based, it is

reasonable and has been carefully considered and thought over. It is seasoned by time and contemplation. True theology believes that we can love God with our minds and that those minds can be used to discern and rationally explain what is believed. This thinking, however, is always under the authority of Scripture.

*Theology and the Bible  
Are Different*

For many, theology and the Bible are equally authoritative. A careful distinction must be drawn between the two. The Bible is inspired canon, theology is not. The

*Theology Is Practiced  
by All Bible Believers*

Anyone who reads the Bible and attempts to apply it to life is a theologian. Theology is not an elitist occupation that requires years of special study. Specialized study can enhance theological work but non-specialists also do theology. People do not need to preface their remarks by saying, “I am not a theologian but I believe that the Bible teaches. . . .” Such a statement is a clear sign that they are about to do theology in spite of their disclaimer. The question is not whether people do theology but rather whether it is well done

**The Bible is inspired canon, theology is not. The Bible does not change, theology does. The Bible is authoritative universally, theology is not.**

Bible does not change, theology does. The Bible is authoritative universally, theology is not. To question or alter theology is not necessarily to question or alter Scripture. This sets us free to begin to look at Scripture with fresh eyes because its interpretation has not been authoritatively fixed. To believe that traditional interpretations are authoritative is Roman Catholic doctrine. Theology then can be authentically African (or from within any other culture) and Adventist when it is based on Scripture.

or poorly done, carefully prayed over, and reflected on or not.

*Theology Is Contextualization  
and Contextualization  
Is Theology*

This definition takes seriously the fact that all theology arises out of a specific situation or context. All theology, whether knowingly or not, is heavily influenced by the language, culture, history, and experiences of the theologian. Calling this exercise theology emphasizes the subject of this study—God. Also calling this exercise “contextualization”

points to the recognition that it happens within a specific human situation.

With this definition the question is not whether it is valid to do theology or contextualization. This definition makes it clear both are being done all the time. The question is rather, How do we do it well so that it bears good fruit for the Kingdom?

Since we have defined and discussed the terms theology, contextualization, and Scripture it is appropriate to briefly mention the fourth term mentioned earlier—doctrine. Doctrine means *teaching* or *belief*. As we use it, the reference is clearly to teachings that the church holds to be standard or authoritative, especially for Adventists, as summarized in the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. Theology can explicate, explain, defend, apply, and question these specific doctrines on the basis of Scripture but is not limited to those topics or beliefs.

### **Practical Observations and Applications**

If we accept these definitions certain observations can be made. While in principle they apply to all situations, I apply them here with special emphasis on Africa.

#### *This Definition Permits and Encourages Creative Theology*

If all theology arises out of a context it means those most familiar with that context would be the best suited to do theology in that situation. I am very poorly qualified to do Ibo theology. This

encourages Africans to do theology because they know their situation better than anyone. Africans are more qualified to do African theology than Europeans or Americans.

I have a strong sense that there is a large, powerful underground spring of theological creativity building up that is just waiting to be released. I am saying; let's take the cap off of it. Let it go. It has not really erupted in the African Adventist Church because of the strong sense of tradition and loyalty. Let us now say that this theological spring is not a criticism of the church. This is an attempt to take full advantage of the marvelous opening God has given the church in Africa. Like loving parents, let us release the youthful church in Africa to make Adventism fully Adventist in an African context.

We must admit that in many ways the Adventism proclaimed in Africa was originally designed for another context. The framing of our Bible studies and evangelistic studies demonstrate that.

Interestingly enough the original Adventist statement of belief in the *Yearbook* arose in part because of the African context, however, not as we might expect. Several European colonial powers wondered about the orthodoxy of the Adventist Church which was doing more and more mission work in their colonial territories. Because of this the African Division of the church made a request to the General Conference. L. E. Froom quotes from the General

Conference minutes of Dec. 29, 1930: "A request was presented from the African Division that a statement of what Seventh-day Adventists believe should be printed in the *Yearbook*, since they feel that such a statement would help government officials and others to a better understanding of our work" (Froom 1971:410).

This means that the original statements of beliefs stated the Adventist doctrines but in a way that emphasized mainline Christian orthodoxy. Would this statement have been the same if it had been drafted to speak in

but when I said that this means asking the question, "What is the Bible basis for what I plan to do?" the lights went on. They were ready and eager to work on the question of "What is the Bible rationale for your project?" while the question of "What is a theology of your project?" was confusing. Phrasing the issue in a way they could relate to, which implied this definition of theology, released their creativity.

*This Definition Allows Us to Learn from Each Other*  
Some African leaders who had

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the context of African traditional religion? I doubt it.

The creativity I am suggesting is not a threat to core Adventist doctrine, and in particular not a lessening of biblical authority, but seeks to organize, state, prioritize, and explicate core doctrines in a way that fits the specific setting. This creativity will allow for the possibility of a difference of opinion on controversial issues such as polygamy and women's ordination.

When I asked my DMin co-learners to do a theology for their projects I was greeted for the most part by dubious stares

staunchly opposed women's ordination, had never heard a theological/biblical and contextual defense of women's ordination. While most may not change their minds because of the context they can change the way they think about the issue. In the same way we in the Global North will learn more than we realize from theologians from other contexts.

I vividly remember my experience of having an African doctoral student come in and propose a project on burial customs in his culture. I did not refuse the project but wondered aloud to him if he would find enough biblical mate-

rial to lay a theological foundation for his work. He got a funny little smile and said he would be back in about two weeks. He came back with page after page of material and after reading it I apologized to him. I could not look at Scripture with African eyes and I had not been taught by my education and culture to be interested in burial customs. I learned not only about burial customs but experienced, in a deeper way, the truth that we need all of God's children to be doing theology and all of us need to learn to listen and learn from each other.

*The More One Knows about  
the Bible and One's Own  
Life Situation, the Better  
Theology Can Be Done*

An extension of this is also true. Those not intimately familiar with the cultural situation need to be careful about dictating their theology to others. One's situation and history can blind one to aspects of biblical truth while putting new questions to the Bible from a cultural setting can enhance our knowledge of God's Word. While culture must not cancel biblical truth it can give us new glasses to see even greater meaning in God's Word.

*Theological Training Should  
Teach Students the Process of  
Doing Theology Along with the  
Results of Earlier Theologizing*

My contention is that most theological training done by Christians is what I would call *historical theology*. We teach

what Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, etc., taught. If you are an Adventist you can add J. N. Andrews, James White, M. L. Andreason, etc. Even the latest Bible doctrines book is, for Africa, historical theology. There is nothing wrong with *some* of this.

However, I believe that equal time should be given to asking and answering the question of how theologians arrived at their conclusions. Where did this come from? I suggest Lutheran theology would be very different if Luther had been raised and educated in a Muslim context. I believe Adventist doctrine and its statements of belief would be much different if they had been birthed by people born and socialized in Sri Lanka or Thailand.

Students must be taught then not only historic theology but they must also learn the process of creating a contemporary theology for their situation. They must learn to read not only historic theology but also their Bibles and their society and then take steps to create out of their matrix a theology that allows Jesus to be seen and understood clearly in their setting.

**Concluding Practical Appeal**

I want to make a two-fold appeal which needs to be taken seriously if what I have discussed above is to really happen.

*Resources, Personnel, Time, and  
Money Must Be Poured into the  
Creation of Practical Materials  
for Evangelism and Nurture*

I have stated publicly that if



I had a million dollars to give I would pour it into the creation of contextualized evangelistic and pastoral resources for the church. You may have thought that my main concern was to see high-level theological materials born in Africa. That would be good but I think the most desperate need now is for practical, down to earth things like Bible study materials and evangelistic sermons that are not simply borrowed and translated from English.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church must move beyond just translating and putting in African pictures and calling that enough.

Cambodia the power of contextualized material to spread the gospel news rapidly.

In due time I believe material like *Missionary Contextualization* (Klingbeil 2005) which comes from the Adventist University in Argentina but includes along with the majority of Latin America authors, writers from Europe and the U.S., will emerge from our universities in Africa. I also believe that day is closer than we think. The theology that begins to emerge as that great underground spring is tapped must be given ways that it can be expressed and communicated.

**The Seventh-day Adventist Church must move beyond just translating and putting in African pictures and calling that enough.**

The church must learn to do better and African leadership must find courage to “just say no” to the groups who want to come and fight in American armor.

I am delighted that a number of the projects coming out of our DMin at Babcock deal with the production of resources specifically designed for the African setting. I hope and pray that these materials can be produced and that non-African evangelists, instead of insisting on their own materials, will take seriously what is produced locally. I have seen first hand in other places like

*False Stereotypes of Africa Must Be Rejected*

Kenneth Ross has suggested that there are two Africas (in Knighton 2004:149, 150). The first one could be called *Christian* and second one could be called *crashed*. The first Africa is the Christian continent that is the new center of gravity for the Christian world. This Africa sees rapid Christian growth, fervor in worship and prayer, and a strong faith in God’s ability to act. This is the Africa of mega churches and people movements. This is the Africa that pastors in North

America would give their right arm for if they could imitate the number of conversions their brothers and sisters in Africa regularly see.

The other Africa is the one the Global North media often portrays. This Africa is viewed as a political and economic disaster area. Dictatorship, corruption, tribalism, civil wars, AIDS, etc. are reported on in great detail while the other side is rarely mentioned. The continent is believed to be locked in a downward economic spiral of decline. Unfortunately many Christians and Adventists emphasize this second Africa which is to a certain extent an image manufactured by Western media. This leads to false pessimism and dismays many Africans as well.

As I was preparing for my trip this summer, I was directly warned by my travel agent to be very careful in lawless Africa. My doctor complimented me on my bravery in going. Both of these people are educated Christians whose view of the continent is one sided. I made the mistake of mentioning my travel agent's words to one of my hosts and the hurt feelings based on that generalizing stereotype were obvious. Africans know their countries and continent have problems. We must remember that the Global North also has many problems. As one told me, our political leaders often betray us. Africans however, like all humans, want to be respected and taken seriously. They want to be understood fairly and they

want people not to forget that first Africa. If the second Africa is mentioned, the least that should be done is that the first Africa should be acknowledged and the tendency to paint with a wide brush should be avoided.

The problem, of course, is that this overly negative stereotype of Africa affects how we view ideas and theology coming from the continent and the confidence of those suggesting those ideas. As we grow to respect Africa and African self confidence grows, the freedom to act and the power of new ideas will blossom.

I firmly believe that the greatest missionary sending continent within the next 40 years will be Africa. If that is so, we must urgently begin to prepare now to not only encourage Africans to write theology for the new Africa, but learn the process so well they can use it as they become cross-cultural missionaries to help the neo-pagan parts of the world write their own new theologies.

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