MISSIONS DURING THE REFORMATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL AND REFORMATION FOCUS IN THE ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Abstract

Perhaps the greatest upheaval in Christian history occurred half a millennium ago, and yet its reverberating effects can still be felt unto the present. The aftermath of the Reformation movement is still a subject of debate among Church historians and mission scholars. Did the Reformation truly advance the work of global missions, or was it simply apathetic to mission endeavors? Does the work of reformation naturally foster the expansion of the church’s frontiers or does this result in an insular institution more focused on its own needs than those of the community? This paper seeks to explore how the experience from 500 years ago can contribute to current Adventist focus on revival and reformation in what may turn out to be the closing epoch of Christianity’s history. How can the church successfully coordinate necessary corporate reformation, at the same time facilitate the phenomenal mission advances that subsequently followed the great reformation in Luther’s age?

**Introduction**

Half a millennium ago a movement which brought about a seismic shift in the religious landscape worldwide had its genesis when Martin Luther nailed upon the door of the church at Wittenberg ninety-five theses protesting the sales of indulgences in his parish. The Reformation resulted in such major theological progress as had not been seen in previous centuries within Christianity. With its reverberating emphasis on Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice for Christians the Reformation ushered in an age of unparalleled theological advancement for the church, which, however, was not analogous missiologically. In the last century scholars have debated the Reformation’s contribution to the church’s primary task, that is, mission to the world. Some argue that Luther, Calvin, and others whose prolific works shed so much light and brought such growth to Christianity could surely not have been silent on the duty of the church. Others, however, note the obvious lacuna in the mission emphasis of the Reformers; for a period of almost three centuries few mission initiatives were launched under the aegis of the Protestant movement. This study shall examine missions during the period of the reformation with the view to learn lessons applicable to the current Adventist emphasis on revival and reformation. It shall seek to answer the questions, “How can the Adventist Church continue to foster the spirit of reformation, while at the same time keep a constant focus on world evangelization?” “What can Adventists do to prevent the fission the Reformation precipitated due in part to ecclesiastical intransigence, and refusal to contextualize and recalibrate its mission?”

**Mission Priority**

Christianity, from its inception has been characterized by a passionate missionary thrust. Its history has been described as “a story of the church in mission.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Christ, before His departure from earth gave His apostles the mission mandate to take the gospel into every corner of the world (Matt 28:18-20). The New Testament records about 206 different references featuring the expression, “to send,” an indication of the primacy of the missionary task Christ gave to the apostles.[[2]](#footnote-2) During mission the church participates with Christ in an enterprise most dear to His heart, in the way and manner that He did while on earth.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In recent times, missiologists and theologians have employed the concept, *missio Dei*, to explain that mission “is primarily, and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission has its origin in the heart of God.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, mission springs from the heart of God, Who is its Initiator and Sponsor. Therefore, because mission is a priority with God it ought to be the same with the church, “over all other activities of the Sprit and even the formation of the church.”[[5]](#footnote-5) As German theologian Martin Kahler over a century ago observed, mission “is the mother of theology,” a point illustrated by David Bosch through the experience of the gospel writers, whose mission, he explains, was not to theologize but to present Christ as Savior of world.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Mission and the Reformation**

Although the birthdate for the Protestant reformation is traced to Oct 31, 1517[[7]](#footnote-7), the precursors of the tectonic shifts which followed the movement predated it by decades, even centuries. Foremost were unmet spiritual needs, coupled with the abuses and corruption that were rife in the church during the 15th and 16th centuries.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Among the issues were the priestly conditions of “lethargy, luxury, and even stark immorality between 1350 and 1500.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Besides the moral depravity in certain quarters of the church hierarchy and the spiritual malaise evident in many churches and monasteries, another harbinger of the Reformation was theological. The Reformation has been regarded as primarily a theological revolution that tackled issues such as the means of salvation, ecclesiastical authority,[[10]](#footnote-10) the authority of Scripture, and the election of believers.[[11]](#footnote-11) For Cornelius Letunga there could be seen eight independent reforming movements during the period intent on correcting the abuses in the church, cleansing its malaises and seeking to restore piety and devotion to God.[[12]](#footnote-12) The vanguards of these movements included the following: Erasmus, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, the Anabaptist Movement (Radical Reformation), Spiritualists, Roman Catholic Council of Trent, and the Reformation in England. However, the focus of this study is primarily on the Protestant Reformers, chief of whom were Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli.

Scholars have long debated the contribution of the Reformation pioneers to the advancement of mission during the period. Mission scholar, Hans Kasdorf, offers a lucid summation of the various viewpoints on the mission contribution of the early Reformers. In his objective analysis, Kasdorf divides the articles in English and German into three broad categories: the Warneck tradition,[[13]](#footnote-13) positive view, and the neutral position.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Warneck observes in the Reformers writings “a strange silence” regarding missions, asserting that Luther’s view of the “missionary task of the church was essentially defective.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This he attributes to both Luther’s eschatology (the end was so close), and theology (the Gospel Commission was an accomplished task of the Apostles alone, so God did not need our help).[[16]](#footnote-16)

In support of Warneck’s perspective mission historian Stephen Neill observes that, “during the period of the Reformation there was little time for thought about missions. Until 1648 Protestants were fighting for their lives; it was only the Peace of Westphalia that year which made certain Protestantism’s survival.[[17]](#footnote-17) Neil disparagingly concludes, “when all possible evidences from the writings of the Reformers have been collected, it all amounts to exceedingly little.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Similarly, theologian and church historian, Allister McGrath, opines, that Calvin and Luther had no particular interest in “mission or evangelism” beyond the reaches of Christendom, and for that reason it took considerable time for interest in overseas mission among Protestants to develop. [[19]](#footnote-19) Among the reasons McGrath cites for Protestantism’s early mission disinterest were both practical and theological factors: (1) Protestants were hemmed in by Catholic territories--being landlocked they could not reach the heathen, (2) Evangelism was regarded as the function of the state rather than a task for individual Christians, (3) The principle of *cuius regio cuius religio*, which states, the religion of the ruler determined the faith of his subjects, (4) Protestant territories, unlike Catholic Spain and Portugal, lacked exploratory and evangelistic structures and the motivation to do foreign missions.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Conversely, other scholars, right from the time of Warneck, have sought to correct the impression that Luther and the Reformers made no significant mission contribution during their lifetimes. A principal argument of theirs is the unfair tendency to judge the Reformers by modern yardsticks of what mission means, rather than paying careful attention to the effects of their works on the expansion of the church, the context they lived, and the structures established, which culminated in the missionary zeal of later centuries. Supporters of Luther acknowledge his “geographical blindness;”—his belief that the church already had a presence in the greater part of the world. However, they state he was not blind to the church’s duty of proclaiming the gospel to those who had not heard or accepted it.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is therefore contended that “Luther was not a mission strategist in the modern pragmatic sense, but he had a strong mission motivation. His theology includes a clear misisological dimension, which sometimes comes to a very practical expression.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Accordingly, the practical contribution of the Reformation to mission can be seen to include: “the pure gospel, the Bible translation, the small Catechism, and the reform of worship, among others.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Despite Warneck’s critical appraisal of mission during the Reformation, he does concede that, “the Reformation did a great indirect service to mission, inasmuch as it brought the matter of mission-preaching again into the consciousness of the church, by its energetic proclamation of the pure bible gospel.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

In retrospect, considering the nature, scope, and significance of missions to Christianity it would appear that the Reformation may not have made so much of an impact missiologically during the lives of the Reformers. Nevertheless, it is evident that it was the struggles of the Reformers that gave common people voices and roles in the community of faith. Ultimately, this provided the structures for understanding Scriptures and salvation, which eventually contributed in no small measure to the great missionary age which followed, albeit, centuries later.

**Issues from the Reformation**

Centuries after the great Reformation movement several mission issues have risen to the fore worthy of consideration. Among them are observations such as: mission usually arises not from the median of society but from the margins; also, mission focus back then shifted from monasteries to the cities and marketplaces; further, there was a shift from the central authority of the church to the universal priesthood of believers; the significance of theology and eschatology to mission; and the need for balancing spirituality and activity for effective mission; and the danger of dissipating energy through divisions.

Mission from the Margins

Very few, if any, Protestant mission ventures bore fruit until centuries after the Reformation. When they did eventually commence it is noteworthy that the primary agents came from the margins of leadership and society and not from the mainstream. The Pietists, that branch from which they emerged, the Radical Reformers (from which also arose the Anabaptists) were among the most zealous and successful missionaries who bore the mission flame across the world. These mission pioneers and heroes arose from obscurity. This should come as no surprise though, since the Scriptures also bear witness to God’s penchant for finding and using persons from the margins to fulfill His purposes crossculturally (Eg, Abraham (Gen 12), Moses (Exod 3), David (1 Sam), Elijah (1 Kgs 17), Amos (). Prior to the Reformation persons who sought to commit their lives to mission service left society and moved into monasteries. From these centers emerged the ebb and flow of mission activities to the surrounding communities. In such settings monks and clergy who committed their lives and resources were almost regarded as supermen/women. The Protestant Reformation, however, produced a new cadre of mission actors, these were ordinary artisans, workers, and women.

Urban Shift in Focus

Another dimension the Reformation introduced into missions was a shift in the center of kingdom activities from the rural settings of monasteries to the cities and marketplaces. Alistair McGrath notes that this shift from the monastery to the marketplace was fraught with danger as Christianity was forced to maintain its purity and integrity while submerged in the dynamics of a real world.[[25]](#footnote-25) The result was a mission focus that was real, relevant, and contextual. In our present age where rural to urban migration is high, mission needs again to be centered around the cities. As cities played vital roles in the ministries of Jesus and Paul, they should again be tests of the success of the church’s mission paradigms.

Universal Priesthood of Believers

The Pre-Reformation world was one in which authority was centered around the clergy. Mission strategy and participation was more often than not the prerogative of the clergy. However, the Reformation’s emphasis on the priesthood of all believers led to the emergence of mission participation and contribution from previously unknown places. One of the greatest contributions of the Reformation was the development of mission societies directed by laity and supported by the pennies collected from poor workers. Using mission stories from distant lands they reached the hearts of common people and raised financial support for mission activities abroad. Everyone could now play a part in the mission of the church, and for the kingdom of God.

Significance of Eschatology and Theology

The major Reformers, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli appeared to have made theology, rather than mission their priority, perhaps for obvious reasons. The significance attributed to William Carey’s emphasis on the need for foreign missions, premised on the Great Commission mandate, is indication of the flawed theological and eschatological positions of the great Reformers. It is evident that motivation for mission derives from sound theological and eschatological foundations. For the Reformers like Luther the belief in the imminence of Christ’s return appeared to have restrained foreign missionary impulse. Conversely, for pioneer Adventists this conviction provided the impetus for missionary zeal. What this suggests is that sound mission theology and balanced biblical eschatology is pivotal to sustain the missionary thrust required to take the gospel around the world. The church therefore needs to regularly check and recalibrate its theology and eschatology to ensure they are in consonance with the times.

Balanced Spirituality and Activity

The spiritual tenor prior to the Reformation was at its lowest ebb. The air around some monasteries was tainted with the miasma of licentiousness, greed, and vice. In spite of this, over the centuries the church had always been engaged in foreign missions. Various religious orders and brotherhoods led in missions to Asia and other regions. The Reformation however, did not produce any appreciable mission success during the period, or in the century that followed. Commenting on this, Warneck submits, “thus the age of the Reformation brings before us a twofold fact, which at first is surprising: *first* that a church may be very lively spiritually, and yet may carry on no mission; and *second*, that a church may carry on a mission and yet be spiritually dead.”[[26]](#footnote-26) On one hand, although a missionary church is a powerful testimony of commitment to the Lord, spiritual vitality is nonetheless, essential. On the other hand, a church with deep spirituality, and doctrinal purity yet lacking in missionary fervor is in itself an oxymoron. Spirituality minus mission focus is akin to faith without works—the result is deadness (Jam 2:26).

Could this account for the muted mission accomplishments that plagued the Reformation movement for centuries until the eighteenth century age of modern missions? Applying this insight to contemporary Adventism, regions presently experiencing massive evangelistic growth, need to be cautious so that missionary fervor is balanced with spiritual vitality. This is necessary to ensure existing churches do not display faith that is, “a mile long and an inch deep.” Similarly, in regions that strive for doctrinal purity similar attention is needed to prevent mission apathy, and the demise of the church within a generation or two.

Danger of Divisions

Undoubtedly the Reformers lived in very precarious times. Constantly under the threat of death, they needed to be extremely courageous and bold to air their views and advance the cause. In some respects, they could be classified as Type A personalities. Also, the worldview of Luther, and other Reformers was one that regarded the world as a battlefield, as such, for Luther, “mission means fighting.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Little wonder then that the Reformers eventually bore arms, entered the battlefield, and were seemingly constantly embroiled in conflicts—especially among themselves. Regarding the internecine conflicts between the early Reformers, Neill declares,

Instead of standing together and waiting for better times to clear their theological differences, Protestants everywhere wasted their strength with honorable but blind and reckless zeal, in endless divisions and controversies—strict Lutherans against ‘Phillipists,’ Lutherans against Reformed, Calvinist predestinians against Arminians, Anglicans against Puritans and Independents.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In some ways the uniqueness of Adventist doctrines, and the contexts members find themselves cause them to take stances contrary to societal norms. This may require possession of strong character traits, which also may predispose believers to constant bickering and hair-splitting over theological issues. This usually comes at the cost of a reduced focus on mission. Finances, energy, and time should rather be directed at advancing the kingdom than on any other venture, no matter how urgent they may appear. Mission must be the Adventist movement’s touchstone lest it forgets its *raison d’etre*.

In commemorating this monumental landmark for global Christianity Evangelical scholars often talk about the need to perpetuate the spirit of the Reformation. This should entail the readiness to speak truth to power, and to church structures of the times that need reform. It means standing for the right, though the heavens fall, and seeking the kingdom and glory of God over selfish agenda and ambitions.

**Adventist Revival and Reformation**

In July 2010, upon his election as president of the global Adventist Church, Elder Ted Wilson launched the Revival and Reformation program. This major thrust of his administration harks back to the appeal by revered church pioneer, Ellen White, who states, “a revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. To seek this should be our first work.”[[29]](#footnote-29) White adds,

A revival and a reformation must take place, under the ministration of the Holy Spirit. Revival and reformation are two different things. Revival signifies a renewal of spiritual life, a quickening of the powers of mind and heart, a resurrection from spiritual death. Reformation signifies a reorganization, a change in ideas and theories, habits and practices. Reformation will not bring forth the good fruit of righteousness unless it is connected with the revival of the Spirit. Revival and reformation are to do their appointed work, and in doing this work they must blend.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Significantly, White also asserts, “the Reformation did not, as many suppose, end with Luther. It is to be continued to the close of this world's history. Luther had a great work to do in reflecting to others the light which God had permitted to shine upon him; yet he did not receive all the light which was to be given to the world.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Clearly, as Ellen White explains, there is need for the Reformation to continue within the present Adventist Church. If that is the case, and it is accepted that parallels do exist between the church then and present, it is incumbent on all that lessons from the Reformation era be understood and applied for the church’s wellbeing.

One of the obvious aftermaths of the religious earthquake spawned by the Reformation was the fission of old church structures and the creation of new biblical models. While it is arguable that these divisions led to the expansion of God’s kingdom, it will be agreed that they did come at a great price. This is clearly seen in the religious and political wars that swept through Europe during the period. A question that may be asked is, “Could the Reformation have been avoided?” Could the deaths, divisions, and devastation that came with such massive human, emotional, and capital toll have been prevented? It may be disputed by some that the Reformation was inevitable, and that behind the outcomes was the hand of God carefully guiding events so that a flood of light from the Scriptures could emerge.

Although one can only conjecture in retrospect regarding these questions, as the Adventist Church promotes its programs on revival and reformation the following cautions from the Reformation era may prove beneficial: the need for more dialogue and consideration within church ranks; persecution in the name of God; danger of cult following; the link between missions and money; and mission priority.

Dialogue and Consideration

Prior to Luther’s advent of on the religious scene none could have ever imagined that the church of that age could ever fragment, or that ecclesiastical authority was anything but inviolable. Centuries later the Reformations’ revolution is a powerful reminder to all of the need for dialogue. Because church organizations can splinter more listening is needed between parties with disparate views, opinions, and methods.

Ellen White counsels, “If our people were half awake, if they realized the nearness of the events portrayed in the Revelation, a reformation would be wrought in our churches, and many more would believe the message. We have no time to lose. . . . Advance new principles, and crowd in the clear-cut truth. It will be as a sword cutting both ways.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This reformation can only occur when more dialogue and consideration of seemingly disparate opinions are entertained. Parameters should guide any dialogue, such as the Word of God—the arbiter and foundation for any consensus. Also, a spirit of humility and love should permeate such endeavors, lest Christians wind up thinking that they are fighting the battles of the Lord, while bearing and employing the weapons of Satan. Whatever the issue may be, when parties disagree they need to remember that the other person is a child of God too, and therefore is a brother or sister with similar access to God.

Persecution in God’s Name

When the church leaders of his day agreed to meet with Luther it was with the express intent to make him recant, otherwise, face the wrath of inerrant church leadership. The intolerance of obdurate leadership made the church a persecuting power of conscientious believers such as Luther and the Reformers. What is tragically ironic is that Luther himself, as well as some pioneer reformers, had intolerant views and attitudes towards others they perceived were theologically divergent. They even advocated for death by drowning of the Anabaptists—the radical reformed group who helped restore the biblical doctrine of baptism by immersion. Speaking in this regard Justo Gonzalez warns, about the possibility of “unleashing on the church pastors who were convinced that they knew exactly what God wanted, and who would very likely take on the role of prosecutors before the court of the Great Judge.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The Reformation reminds of how easy it is for the persecuted to become persecutors.

Beware of Cult Following

The image of the Reformers in Christian history looms larger than life. They seem to have places right next to the Apostles, considering their courage, energy, commitment, and zeal for the cause of God. However, as Ellen White reminds, the Reformation did not end with the work of Luther and his counterparts. As remarkable and exemplary the Reformers labors may have been, as honorable and notable their faith and dedication may appear, they were still men “subject to like passions as we are” (Jam 5:17). As a result, the danger of revering these men and establishing cult followings around them is real, and should be resisted. Similarly, Adventists need to watch out against the natural human tendency to hero-worship. Congregations today exist of groups who did not advance beyond the teachings of their founders, the Reformers. Adventists, as custodians of the Reformation legacy, need to constantly hold forth the Scriptures as their only standard of faith and practice keeping alive the motto: “sola scriptura.” Christ alone must be our Master, Savior, and Example.

Mission and Money

Notwithstanding the theological issues at stake, which were primary during the Protestant Reformation, an often ignored element that heightened the tension and brought the issue to the fore was the issue of money. Luther’s challenge struck at the financial umbilical cord supporting the papal enterprise, hence, the reaction which was swift and deadly. Historically, missions have ridden on the backs of merchants and tradesmen; believers who took their faith with them wherever they conducted business. The Reformation period was no different. Because money oils the wheels of mission engines it is so easy to fall into the trap of a business-model for mission. Although money is vital for missions it must never take precedence over, or supersede the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In addition, mission priority must be the ultimate focus as the church stresses programs on revival and reformation.

In conclusion, the effects of the Reformation are here to stay, and its lessons remind the church about the need to keep mission a priority. As the Adventist Church seeks to perpetuate the spirit of the Reformation through its programs on Revival and Reformation, it is incumbent on church leadership to create the right atmosphere that will facilitate continual spiritual growth for members and prevent fission. As custodians of the Reformation legacy the church must not repeat the errors of the past but employ them as learning blocks in fulfilling its mission mandate of worldwide evangelization despite distractions, divisions, and discouraging scenarios.

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