HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists was published at the pivot point of the denomination’s mission development. By 1886 the young church had been in the foreign mission business for a dozen years. But as yet it had only four missions (three in Europe and one in Australia/New Zealand), and those four were just moving beyond their infancy stage.

Nevertheless, those missions had been established and patterns of doing mission work had been explored. By late 1886 the Adventists were becoming ever more committed to foreign missions. As a result, their first book-length document on missions represents both an historical record of the denomination’s early missions, along with reports on the strategies developed to further those missions, and also a call for a much more expanded mission work in the future. Within three years of the publication of Historical Sketches, Adventism’s General Conference would send S. N. Haskell and P. T. Magan on a two-year trip around the world to locate promising mission locations in which and from where the church could extend its mission outreach program. In the 1890s the Adventist mission endeavor would explode as Adventist missionaries were sent to the farthest corners of the earth.

Thus Historical Sketches, when seen in its context, was both a summary sketch of Adventism’s missiological past and a pointer and an appeal to the future. This introduction will first provide a brief history of the denomination’s mission development. That will be followed by a content analysis of Historical Sketches.

An Overview of Adventist Mission Development

Seventh-day Adventists currently support one of the most ambitious mission outreach programs in the history of Christianity. As of January 2004, they were sponsoring work in 204 of the world’s 230 nations, preaching and teaching in 882 languages, and publishing literature in 349 languages. They had planted their schools, medical institutions, and
publishing houses in all parts of the earth, impelled by the driving force of a belief that holds that the second coming of Christ will not take place until “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations” (Matt. 24:14).

The extensiveness of Adventist mission outreach is the product of a prophetic consciousness based on Christ’s great “Gospel Commission” of Matthew 28:19-20. While accepting that commission as a mission mandate to Christians in general, Seventh-day Adventists have been driven by a more specific mission to preach the message of the three angels of Revelation 14 (the “everlasting gospel” linked with the distinctive Adventist doctrines) “to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6-12).

According to Adventist understanding, the end of earth’s history will not come until the voice of the three angels has been heard throughout the earth. That view has undergirded and pushed forward the Adventist drive for world mission. It has inspired Adventism to evangelize in every nation. As a result, Seventh-day Adventists have not seen themselves as one denomination among many, but as a people with God’s end-time message (Rev. 12:17; 14:12).

That line of prophetic interpretation has dominated Adventism for more than a century, but such a burden could not have been predicted by the denomination’s founders and earliest members. In fact, one of the most important doctrines in the denomination’s earliest theology was that of a shut door to mission.

**Phase I: The Shut Door Mission Era (1844-1852)**

The earliest phase of Sabbatarian Adventist mission theory and practice (the Sabbatarian Adventists organized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863) can be accurately described as a “shut door” on general mission outreach. That concept was not original with the Sabbatarian group, but had been developed by William Miller and his followers in the early 1840s.

Miller and his fellow believers had preached that Jesus would return about 1843 or 1844. They finally established the exact date of Christ’s advent as October 22, 1844. Miller likened his message to the “midnight cry” in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25). That parable claims that when the bridegroom (i.e., Christ) comes, the door will be shut, leaving some on the outside. “The door was shut,” Miller held in the early 1840s, “implies the closing up of the mediatorial kingdom, and finishing the gospel period.”