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This issue of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* continues the interesting and challenging discussion that took place in Cancun, Mexico from May 2-9, 2016, where most of the Andrews University faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary met for a Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics, Methodology, and Worldview. Several of the articles in this issue were presented at that forum.

There is a growing awareness that all people have acquired multiple filters that impact their interpretation of the biblical text. These filters either allow them to see or not to see certain aspects in the Word of God. Ann Hamel’s interesting article describes many of the psychological factors that are acquired so early in life that people are not even aware that they have been shaped and formed by their environment, experiences, and their culture to see the world in a particular way, while also being resistant to new or other possible ways of viewing and interpreting what they see.

Darius Jankiewicz’s article on the Hermeneutics of Slavery is a reminder of the sad fact that even so-called godly people have used a “Bible and the Bible only” approach to support their very wrong interpretations of Scripture. This should be a warning to all today that the best interpretation of Scripture, even when using and following the rules of biblical interpretation can go terrible wrong because of underlying presuppositions and cultural filters that warp the intent of Scripture and distort God’s character.

For too long there has been the view that if the Bible student does the proper word study, looks at the grammar, syntax, the statistical use of words and phrases, understands the different literary features, and follows the many other important methodological principles of the grammatico-historical approach to hermeneutics, then the right interpretation will be arrived at. The events in the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the past six years concerning the issue of women’s ordination has proven this to be not true. Culture, personal experience, and worldview impacts how a person reads and interprets Scripture.

Welcome to the discussion.

Bruce L. Bauer, editor
WAGNER KUHN AND ANDREW TOMPKINS

Theology on the Way: Hermeneutics from and for the Frontline

Introducing the Challenge

The title, “Theology on the Way,” denotes the authors’ beliefs and views that the Bible is a book that constantly reveals God’s knowledge, character, truth, principles, methods, and redemptive power—and these are to be understood, interpreted, lived out, and applied on the frontline of mission for the salvation of humanity. When the gospel crosses cultural boundaries it creates a unique set of challenging questions that are relevant to the wider discussion of hermeneutics for students of the Word of God. Taking a sample test case from the Indian setting may help in framing the discussion this article is meant to foster on the interplay of hermeneutics, theology, and mission. This interplay is a reality when praxis (mission) and hermeneutics inform theory (theology), and also when theology (the knowledge of God) and biblical hermeneutics inform mission actions (praxis).

As the Gospel entered into a new setting within a particular Indian village, those receiving the witness were primarily from a Hindu background. It was then that, the gospel began interacting with both the presenters of the gospel and the Word of God in a very dynamic way. The presuppositions and cultural background of an Indian are very different from that of a North American. This created tensions in how God was approached and understood, both through the Bible and experiences. Often times the North American would emphasize certain portions of Scripture or certain interpretations of Scripture that the Indian did not relate to. On the flip side the Indians often found other portions of Scripture and alternative interpretations more relevant and meaningful.

An example of this was a study on the Sabbath. When the Sabbath was presented from the Ten Commandment viewpoint with reference to creation as proof, it lacked meaning in the Indian context. But as some of the
Indian people in this particular place began to experience God through answers to prayer and other types of miraculous events, they desired to follow Jesus. In addition they began to interpret the biblical Sabbath within a more devotional context that was very relevant within the broader Indian cultural understanding. Suddenly the Sabbath took on new meaning as a time of devotional importance. But the way Sabbath texts or stories in Scripture were reinterpreted often left the North American uncomfortable. This led (and often leads) to important questions that sometimes remain unanswered.

How does one teach appropriate Bible study within a cultural setting that is very different from one’s own cultural background? What happens when the interpretations of the presenter and the receiver are different and appear to be in conflict? How can the hermeneutic be checked and assessed? Who gets to decide which hermeneutical framework to use? Does the Bible itself contain the answers to these questions? This paper moves forward with these real life questions as its backdrop.

The Issue of Methodology: Biblical Studies, Theology, and Mission in Dialogue

Various methodological presuppositions influence the disciplines of biblical studies, theology, and mission and affect not only those who are directly involved in them, but also the product of their work (Martines 2005:233–234). Some scholars and practitioners advance their work, sometimes unaware that they are being influenced by different methodologies and continue their theological and missiological endeavors without reflecting on or evaluating the presuppositions that undergird them. Much is done in theological reflection and also in mission practice, but less is done in regards to the methods in the middle, the methods that are connected directly with the believer, as well as the institutions that help carry the gospel to the whole world.

In a lot of ways theology (biblical studies about God) and mission “are like half-siblings who share—at least in part—a common parentage, are raised in the same settings, quarrel over the same space, and argue the same issues. It is unfortunate that this has often led to polarization and mutual hostility, for each has much to learn from the other” (Hiebert 2009:126). These disciplines could profit if there would be more discussion and reflection about the way theology (revelation) and mission are practiced. It is disadvantageous when the various disciplines work alone in their peculiar spaces, apart from each other.

With the above tensions in mind, this article proposes a theology that is “on the way.” Thus, this theology that is on the way is developed and
grows out of the frontline of mission. Therefore, it follows that the hermeneutics utilized to understand, interpret, and apply biblical truths will naturally grow from a theology that is on the way, and is at the frontline of mission. Such is the case of Scriptures—whose narratives and principles can still be considered very frontline mission today.

Theology on the way is a theology that first and probably foremost recognizes its limitations. It finds its roots in the Edenic beginning and is moving towards its finality in the eschaton to come. It is a developing theology ever growing, changing, and renewing. It is a theology that involves constant dialogue with God through his self-revelation, most clearly seen in Scripture, but also in many other forms (i.e., nature, dreams and visions, personal testimony, the church as a body, the works of the Spirit, etc.). However, Scripture is the norm that norms all other revealed truths. By Scripture alone the other sources of God’s revelation to humans are to be tested. But it must also be pointed out that because of the dynamic nature of theology “on the way,” it must be engaged in frontline application. The Bible itself demonstrates that “correct interpretations of Scripture are most often surrounded by correct understandings and practices of God’s mission” (Redford 2012:8). It can also work the other way around when correct praxis leads to correct interpretation. Hence the concept of a “hermeneutical spiral.” For a comprehensive treatment of these themes see Grant Osborn’s book, The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation (2006).

Because the frontline reveals new questions and new challenges, these factors force Bible students to rethink and reevaluate their approaches to hermeneutics, to theology, and to mission. This article seeks to demonstrate this process through biblical case studies and by looking at possible applications in current contexts (Kuhn 2013:15–26).

**Biblical Cases: The Bible as Frontline Mission**

The message and mission given by God in the Bible comes from his revelation and initiative to seek and save (Gen 3:9, 15, 21). This revelation (message) gives meaning, content, and direction to the study of God’s Word, theological reflection, and the practice of mission. Theology and mission are always present in the salvation process as God takes the initiative to reveal himself, thus providing a message and a mission for God’s people. These are based on the revelation of his character and his initiative to save (Missio Dei). The example of Moses provides a good illustration of this: God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and from this experience and revelation that takes place through a divine initiative, Moses grows in understanding God’s will and plans for his people. The message God
reveals to Moses provides the content and method for his mission and subsequently a major part of the content for the Scriptures.

Throughout Moses’ life there was a constant give and take between Moses, his local context, and God (see Exod 17; 19; 24; and the entire book of Deuteronomy). It seems plausible to state that Moses’ understanding of God developed in, and sometimes even through, his engagement with the people of Israel. Moses’ understanding also grew through his more direct encounters with God on Mt. Sinai, which would eventually involve a written text. The dynamics of God working through Moses to reveal himself to the children of Israel is yet another way God utilized humanity to reveal who he is.

Moses also lives out the message in his own life. He writes: “But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exod 32:32). This is a powerful and vivid example of the translation-incarnation concept in the Old Testament. “He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt. . . . He persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (Heb 11:25–27).

It is also true Moses could only understand God within his own cultural setting; thus the methods and approaches used by God were understandable and relevant to Moses, and in many ways, different than the ways God had chosen to reveal himself in the past and how he would reveal himself in the future.

The vision and encounter that Paul had with Christ provides perhaps one of the best examples of the unity of theology and mission and how these two disciplines (facets of God’s revelation), walk hand in hand. In the knowledge of God (theology) and the preaching of the gospel (mission), the knowledge and salvation of God is transmitted, that is, given to the Gentiles. Paul writes and transmits theology in mission, and this mission (Acts 9) is also the factor that drives Paul’s theology. “From his own perspective Paul was first an evangelist and missionary, and only secondarily a theologian. Or, to be more precise, his theology was not independent of but rather servant to his ‘grand passion’—to preach Christ to and among the Gentiles ([Rom] 1:13–15; Gal 1:16)” (Dunn 1998:xli). In preaching—he writes; and in writing—he preaches. It is theology and mission walking hand in hand.

Peter also receives a vision (Acts 10) wherein God reveals his plans for the salvation of the Gentiles, an all-encompassing mission not only for Peter but also a mission for the entire early church. Peter’s reality and worldview are shaken and changed. This revelation of God’s mission and his plan of salvation (which includes people of all races, languages, and
nations), led the apostles to expand their theology and to contextualize their mission methods. The vision broke down barriers, prejudices, traditions, and human rules, and provided a broader understanding of God (theology), his Word (revelation), and his mission (actions), and strongly determined the mission of the church.

In Christ, theology and mission are joined together perfectly. In him (Isa 7:14) we receive the knowledge and mission of a God who is not only eternal and divine, but also a loving and personal God (John 1:1, 14; White 1898:15). In the incarnated Christ—the gospel and good news of God—is the example, the method, and the principle par excellence of God’s mission and the mission of his disciples and the church. And in him is found the center and focus of Scriptures.

This pattern of integrating theology with mission is clearly provided in the Bible. Thus, mission is not the mother of theology as some advocate, nor is it more important. Theology likewise, is not superior or more important than mission. One does not come before or after the other, as indicating importance or precedence. One informs and complements the other. The entire Bible gives people a balanced understanding of theology and mission and how they are joined together. This becomes evident in the life and ministry of Christ, as God unites himself with humanity to save the fallen human race.

However, when theologians or missiologists “sit in ivory towers (current day offices) and understand/do theology, without engaging in a practical, missional way, then that theology is impractical” (Petras Bahadur, October 8, 2014, e-mail message to Kuhn), inappropriate, and unrealistic, as it does not integrate the reality of life as it is lived out in all its dimensions. When mission practitioners do not engage in serious Bible study and in dialogue with biblically grounded theologians and the discipline of theology, their work is without foundation, identity, and direction.

Furthermore, the purpose of theology and mission is to demonstrate in word and deed, in theory and in practice, the everlasting gospel (Rev 14). It is to focus on the cross of Calvary, declaring and presenting with power and effectiveness the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Paul demonstrates this theology and this mission by getting as close as possible to people in order to lead them to Christ. He says: “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22).

This is the methodology of Paul, who by word and deed joins into his ministry, both the knowledge and the preaching of the gospel. He says, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). He takes the example of Christ and contextualizes it in his own apostolic life. Paul’s theology and mission relate to each other, not just as theory and
practice, in the sense that his mission flows from his theology, a linear concept. But rather in the sense that his theology is mission oriented, and his mission is fully related to his identity, vocation, and calling, a more spiral/circular concept. Both his theology and mission are birthed in God’s revelation, and as such God’s revelation (vision/Scriptures) propels Paul’s mission and drives his theology. Paul is a theologian, but first and above all he is an apostle, a servant, a missionary (Bosch 1991:123–124, 492–496; Dybdahl 2005:1; van Bemmelen 2005:29).

The Incarnation of God: Mystery and Model for Theology and Mission

The most profound example of mission and theology coming together is the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. While the other examples serve to show how humans are a major part of the mission process and theological development process, the Incarnation does this on a whole different level. Christ becomes and is God’s translation into an audible, visible, and touchable reality to humanity. Thus, Christ is not only the reality through whom all must understand Scripture and norm all hermeneutics used to understand it, he is also the hermeneuter par excellence (see Luke 24:13–35; John 9:1–5; Matt 5:21–22, 27–30, 31–32, 33–37, 38–42, 43–48; 23:23–24).

The Incarnation is a furthering of the mission of God by direct involvement. Jesus comes to earth and incarnates within a given cultural context, whereby he goes about a transformative work of service (teaching, healing, and preaching) on behalf of humanity that ultimately leads to the cross. This is then recorded in the Gospels and maintained as a source of theological knowledge to be internalized by every follower from that point forward.

If theology is on the way, and therefore incomplete, it moves the closest to completion in Jesus’ walk on earth. However, just as Jesus said, there was much he wanted to tell the disciples but would not because they were not ready, so also the Incarnation is the centering event, but still participate in theology on the way because people today are still required to interpret his life for our given situations, and likewise each new believer who accepts it.

It is revealing that Jesus engaged with people through story telling as much as any other type of discourse. What this seems to imply is that the simple art of storytelling is a profound approach to the theological and missiological vocation. In other words, Jesus is quite possibly attempting to show a more appropriate way of doing theology and mission in a single act, that of storytelling. This is profound in that Jesus utilizes an arguably universal language to approach deep things. Narrative is an integral part
of Scripture, without which the Scripture would have far less meaning. Therefore, a hermeneutic of Scripture that takes seriously Jesus’ Incarnation must take seriously the simple art form of storytelling.

This frontline Bible hermeneutics will lead to sound theology. It is a hermeneutic that is simple, in that it can cross many boundaries and borders and still make sense and be understood. In fact, the Incarnation, as a whole, is an example of God’s theology and mission worked out in a contextual manner to be replicated until he comes again. Christopher Wright may say it best. It is “the Bible which glories in diversity and celebrates multiple human cultures, the Bible which builds its most elevated theological claims on utterly particular and sometimes very local events, the Bible which sees everything in relational, not abstract, terms, and the Bible which does the bulk of its work through the medium of stories” (2006:47, emphasis in original).

What these biblical examples showcase is a hermeneutical approach to the Word of God that is intimately tied to mission on the frontlines, since the Bible itself is a book—past, present, and future—from and for the frontlines. All of the above biblical characters were out front leading followers of Christ and aiding God in revealing God in new ways, often times to people who had not yet encountered him in a clear way. As a result, their understanding of God and his Word developed within their given contexts, as a kind of theology on the way. It was not complete, but certainly contained truth and aided those who came after them to continue to encounter, believe, and follow God in meaningful ways.

**Hermeneutical Tests**

Today, while keeping the biblical cases as reference points, there seems to be a need for some sort of hermeneutical tests that find their bases in Scripture. The following four potential tests can aid in developing a sound hermeneutic:

1. Does the hermeneutic lead to other-focused service that is centered in Christ?

2. Is the hermeneutic dynamically formed and engaged with mission situations in real life contexts, which then leads to further Bible study, mission, and engagement?

3. Does the hermeneutic stand up to the Incarnational principle of being able to cross cultural boundaries without forcing someone in a particular culture to be converted to another earthly culture in order to understand it?

4. Does the hermeneutic have the goal of transformation or is it merely a right study method?
Service

God has repeatedly revealed himself as a God in service to humanity. He has done this in direct ways, as well as through his servants on earth. Service is a primary focus of Jesus’ ministry on earth and is seen most clearly during the washing of the disciple’s feet during the Last Supper.

There is a danger within many discussions on hermeneutics for this basic element to become lost. Often discussions of hermeneutics are so wrapped up in right method and appropriate terminology that the basic idea of service is forgotten or neglected. Any hermeneutical system that becomes a distraction from the service of one to another is not a hermeneutic that God can approve of. Even the most well-intentioned hermeneutic, the one attempting to find its basis in the Bible and not in worldly philosophy, can sidetrack service to its detriment. It seems that if God’s people are to take the narratives of Scripture as a serious guide in their development of hermeneutics, then service must come to the forefront (Matt 25:31–46; John 10:25–37).

A more appropriate hermeneutic takes seriously the fallen nature of humanity and its desperate need for service. Therefore, a sound hermeneutic must inspire the mind of anyone who engages in this hermeneutic to humble service. In other words, when people study the Word or see God revealed in other forms, they should have a framework within which they can interpret these things in a way that leads them to a desire to serve others, just as God, in Christ, as well as many of his followers throughout history have done. This is only possible when people engage with the Word of God in a context in which they are also engaging with people. That is to say, if Christians are attempting to study the Word away from the frontlines of mission, the service element quickly becomes lost, simply because they are not being confronted by the needs of others if they are not mingling with them.

Mission Engagement and Hermeneutical Development

As will be seen throughout this section, there is overlap between the four tests, but they also each contain unique elements. While mission and service should not be separated in pragmatics or theology, for the sake of clarity we will separate them here.

Mission is the intentional sharing of the gospel with all people in all cultures. It has been well argued in a variety of sources that God, from the beginning to the present, has been engaging in mission. This is done in two ways: (1) through direct revelation and encounters with people, and (2) through human agents who partner with God in his mission. As
noted above, the narratives of Scripture reveal that God and his followers are constantly on the frontline of mission. They are actively engaging with people in specific contexts, whereby they share who God is. This is done in a variety of settings, with various contexts requiring unique approaches and language to convey the message of God to others.

One result of this process is a dynamic engagement within which theology develops. Paul is a classic example of this. Most of the letters of Paul are written in certain cultural contexts at the frontlines of mission. At the same time they contain deep theological thinking, which is born out of the situations he finds himself in. In contrast to this approach is the real danger that organizations tend to move into “self-preservation” mode that often results in a hermeneutic that develops out of a desire to keep what it already has and thus a method develops which preserves but cannot grow. This danger can only be avoided when mission praxis and hermeneutics go hand in hand (Redford 2012:65–66n75). Paul demonstrates a theology poured forth in mission, which then creates situations whereby Paul enhances his theological understanding.

This approach can be demonstrated with various portions of the Bible in different ways. Redford argues that “correct biblical interpretation took place . . . through a complex and unpredictable set of events that were most often influenced by existing mission practice and these events likewise influenced the mission practice that would follow” (2012:8).

The results of this are a furthering of mission and a crossing of boundaries and borders. By engaging in frontline mission, theology develops in a way that then aids in pushing mission farther along and so the process continues on and on. In many ways it is more a spiral and/or circular process than a linear process. Therefore, mission engagement is vital to both theological and hermeneutical development.

Would Paul have developed the incredible depth of theological thinking he did if he were not engaged in mission? Would the disciples have had anything to tell the world if God had not come down to earth in mission? Would Moses or the prophets have been able to impact Israel if they had remained ascetics in the desert? Would Abraham have passed on his blessings to many nations if he had remained in Ur?

The very Scripture Christians attempt to read correctly has no meaning outside of a mission framework. There would be no Scripture without mission or no mission without revelation (Scripture). Therefore, mission and hermeneutics are very closely tied together. A hermeneutic developed outside the pales of mission is certainly a lifeless hermeneutic and until tested in the throes of mission remains a suspect hermeneutic. It is imperative that whatever developments in hermeneutics that have been worked out thus far should have been tested in mission situations,
preferably even developed out of mission situations. Much like the section on service, so goes this section. If we are in a kind of scholastic mode, then there is a very real risk that the hermeneutical principles developed will struggle to engage with real life situations. This is why it is safer to allow hermeneutics to come out of mission, which is real life.

What this means is that cultural contexts become very important. The practice of mission has clearly shown that entering new cultures and sharing the gospel is not a simple task. It requires openness to the Spirit’s leading, creativity, recognition of cultural differences, and humility. These are also necessary for the development of a good hermeneutic—creating a clear connection between mission and hermeneutical development.

The Incarnational Principle

It can be argued that throughout earth’s history God has engaged humanity through incarnational ways. He walks in the Garden of Eden, wanders into the camp of Abram as a stranger, thunders from Sinai, whispers quietly to Elijah, and is seen in visions and dreams by many. These various examples highlight God’s desire to meet humanity where they are. In order to do this, he must contextualize or incarnate into a given situation. Thus, through the incarnation, Jesus translates himself into human reality (Walls 1996:26).

The supreme example of this, of course, is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God was on earth for an extended period of time, walking, talking, relating, eating, listening, and mingling with people in Palestine. He could be understood not only as a spiritual and physical God but as a social and cultural God as well. Thus, in many ways it is this incarnational principle that sets the biblical understanding of God apart from all other major religious paths that have developed throughout the world. This act of coming down and living within a human cultural setting, and working through the culture to transform humanity, and the culture itself, is a principle that is vital to a good hermeneutic (26–42). After Jesus ascended, this principle continued to be operative through the power of the Holy Spirit. It can be seen in a variety of manifestations. First, through the incarnational witness of the apostles, who not long after Jesus ascension went out into the wider world and began to share the gospel across cultural boundaries. Paul is a primary biblical example of this. He stated it most clearly when he wrote to the Corinthians:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the

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law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under
the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having
the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law),
so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to
win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all pos-
sible means I might save some. (1 Cor 9:19–22)

Paul was not stating something radically new or strange, he was
simply restating the incarnational principle as it played out in his mis-
sion. “How radically different is Paul’s missional willingness to adjust his
hermeneutic for the sake of others, when contrasted to the Western ten-
dency to claim that only one valid hermeneutic exists” (Redford 2012:63).
This principle is also clearly seen in the act of translating the Scriptures
from one language to another. History has shown that Scripture is unique
among literary works in its ability to be translated from one language to
another and de facto from one culture to another and still remain clear,
meaningful, and transformative in power, through the Holy Spirit. This
does not mean that the interpretations or application of Scripture remain
static when Scripture is translated. Quite the contrary, interpretation and
application has been shown to be dynamic as Scripture crosses cultural
boundaries. The Scriptures are viewed from new lenses, as it were, and
applied within the given culture, often times in new ways. This does not
imply that the new interpretations or application did not exist before, as
the Bible is unchanging; but our understandings of it change and grow,
especially as Scripture crosses cultural boundaries. When taken seriously
this actually enhances our understanding of God as presented in Scrip-
ture, because when the various cultural understandings are put together
the picture of God actually becomes more complete.

Seventh-day Adventists have not often engaged in direct Bible transla-
tion. Therefore, the church has lost and missed a lot, both in mission as
well as in hermeneutical development. This lack has also made it difficult
for Adventists to be able to articulate the implications of the phrase, “The
Bible interprets itself.”

What does the incarnational principle mean for hermeneutics? God’s
example of incarnation creates a framework that can help the church be
more responsible with its development of hermeneutical guidelines. As
Christians work together to study the Word of God, it must be kept in
mind that whatever method is developed must also be translatable or
incarnational. In other words, if the methods developed are so complex
and directly tied to Western philosophical presuppositions, this in many
cases will get in the way of the hermeneutic being incarnational. A good
hermeneutic should be able to cross cultural lines without going through
dramatic alterations. In other words, it should be simple enough to move
alongside Scripture, through the translation process, while at the same time being able to lead to a depth of understanding of God’s Word. This approach requires that those engaging in the study of the Word also are engaging in a study of cultures and contexts and, most importantly, doing this in partnership with others from cultural backgrounds different from their own. This is required because “different social customs; different civil, military, and political institutions; different economic and technological conditions; different patterns of thought—all these and more mandate the hermeneutical process” (Davidson 2000:60). For too long the so-called Western academy has dominated the hermeneutical discussion and remained deaf to the majority world’s attempts to correct an often stated ethnocentric hermeneutic. If Western Christians are not careful, they could find themselves in the same hermeneutical stagnation that a majority of the Pharisee’s were in during the time of Jesus. They had developed a hermeneutic that was ethnocentric to the extreme because they were not engaging in mission, therefore they developed a “mission-less hermeneutic.” Jesus came along and offered the opposite, a “mission-filled hermeneutic” (Redford 2012:73).

Seventh-day Adventists have encouraged the historical-grammatical method of Bible study. This, in many ways, is a step in the right direction, because it focuses on allowing the Bible to interpret itself. It then can be translated easily into any cultural setting (Davidson 2000). John Peckham’s Canonical model, which presupposes a “high view of the revelation-inspiration of the canon,” “dual authorship (divine and human)” and “grammatical-historical procedures of exegesis,” is also very helpful (2015:47). It is vital that the whole Canon be allowed to inform people in any culture. All too often in the history of Christian missions the Old Testament has been neglected in Bible translation and in exhortation. This goes against the Canonical model proposed by Peckham.

What must be kept in mind however, is that as the Scriptures cross cultural lines and as people read the Bible in their own cultural setting, they will often and inevitably come to different applications and at times different interpretative conclusions. Westerners must humbly step back and allow this process to take place, lest we force our culturally influenced hermeneutic on others unnecessarily. Then as others engage and begin to interpret the Bible, the safest route is to dialogue together (and not as individual interpreters) in intercultural settings on what the Bible means. This then allows the Bible to lead the process incarnationally in both interpretation and application of its transformational message.

This is only possible if there are some sort of frontline activities or cross-cultural engagements going on, leading to encounters that make the above possible. This means that the need for intercultural settings
is imperative, something the Seventh-day Adventist Church, because of its global nature, is uniquely qualified to do, but something that has not been sufficiently explored up to this point. Are adventists ready to hear the Nigerian, Chinese, Brazilian, Dutch, American, Australian, Lebanese, Samoan, etc., interpretations and applications side by side as equals (Walls 2002:81)? The incarnational example of God throughout history requires that all do this sort of work.¹

Transformational Ability

There is one additional test that is more challenging to assess, but nonetheless necessary. In mission there has been a consistent shift away from the language of conversion to the language of transformation, with regards to what exactly occurs when a person or group of people is confronted with the gospel. Because conversion implies a one-time event, it does not seem to have the fullness of language required to describe the process of a person who has grown up and developed their way of thinking in one worldview and then moves into a new or different worldview. Transforming towards a biblically-shaped worldview, within a given culture, is now recognized as the most appropriate description of what it is that mission is attempting to accomplish. This is all done through the Holy Spirit’s power, but the human agent does play a significant role in the conveyance of the message. This is how God has chosen to further his mission throughout history and presumably will continue to operate in the future. The experience of Peter meeting Cornelius was mentioned above as a transformative experience, even though he had already encountered Jesus in a very real way (for more examples of this in the Bible see Redford 2012:8–84).

What does this mean for hermeneutics? First off, if the primary goal of mission is transformation towards Jesus, then the primary goal of hermeneutics should align with this. Unfortunately, however, there has been too much dichotomy between disciplines so that often the basic assumptions of one discipline do not match with those of another. There may be a tendency for hermeneutical development, carried out away from the frontlines, to move towards proper methods to get at the truth, simply for the sake of getting at the truth (Redford 2012:82). This is often seen in systematic theology when certain topics, such as Christology are studied through a certain hermeneutical method to try and figure out exactly what the Bible teaches concerning Christology. It is also evident at times in biblical studies, when efforts to learn what the text meant to the original audience become the all-encompassing goal.

“We must learn to hear the text together, to let the exegetical expert
work hard on the text, but to insist that what he or she has learned in the privacy of one’s study must be tested in the believing community” (Fee 2000:15). Fee however still seems to prioritize exegesis outside of a mission context. This paper argues that the development of “office” interpretations that are then tested is not necessarily a good way to develop holistic hermeneutics.

When the goal is narrowed to seek the meaning for the original audience, the method will naturally conform to these goals. At the same time, all too often, mission thinkers have built “massive edifices” from single texts to promote mission, which needs perspective and correction from the entire Bible with the help of both biblical and theological scholars (Wright 2006:34).

If, however, the goal is transformation, it forces the method to become more dynamic. It is not enough to simply find out what the Bible says on a given topic or what it meant to the original audience. Rather there needs to be an engagement with real life situations in which questions are being asked to engage the biblical text with, using appropriate study methods within a given context. There has been a theory in the past that biblical studies describe what the text meant, systematic theology figures out what it means throughout Scripture, and practical theology (often including missiology) then applies whatever is handed on to them. This is not a biblical model nor will it lead to hermeneutical principles that lead to transformation. In many ways these separate paths must be joined and go in every direction. The biblical and theological studies aid mission theology which is applied, but mission experiences must come forward and inform the biblical studies and theological studies by asking relevant questions of the present age. Often the experiences or insights concerning actual biblical data from mission situations are not exactly what is found in academic studies and yet how a text speaks in a particular setting may be a more accurate understanding of the text.

What helps in deciding if the hermeneutical principles are appropriate is whether or not the process is leading to transformed lives. This requires time and observation in a humble manner, which looks for changed lives in which the way the Bible is approached and studied aids the process of discipleship. Currently seminary professors too often struggle to know if their biblical and theological studies are leading to transformation because they are too far removed from the actual mission situations occurring on the front lines. The Bible, on the other hand, paints a picture of theological discourse, whether it be the prophets, Jesus, Paul, etc., which is primarily concerned with transformed lives on the front lines. This means a shift towards a more holistic understanding of hermeneutics may be required. Hermeneutics that are simply for aiding in the “right” study of the
Word are in many ways relegated to the cognitive realm. But transformation must take place in the whole being and therefore hermeneutics must develop in such a way to also impact the whole being.

Humility

There may be other tests that could be added to the list above. Certainly each of the tests listed can be refined and improved. There is a need for deep humility in all these things. As Christians move forward in their mission and hermeneutical development there must always be a recognition that this is a “spiral” process (Peckham 2015:58). There is always more to learn and develop, and at times some things must be unlearned. This side of the eschaton, theology will always be on the way, as there will not be a point when we will be able to say we have the exact hermeneutical approaches that need no correction. Just as revelation is progressive, so also is the understanding of hermeneutics. Nor will a time come when Christian mission will be perfect, but Christians can continue, in humility, building both together.

The practical implications of this for our seminary life are important to contemplate. First, this paper proposes that a hermeneutic developed and tested isolated from the frontlines will be an inadequate (or perhaps faulty) hermeneutic. Seminaries are challenged in this regard because the academic settings are often far removed from the frontline challenges of mission. This often leads to research and study that is not directly informed by mission, which leads to an unbalanced and untested hermeneutic. The faculty of any seminary, no matter which department, must actively find ways to be continually involved in frontline missions. This is often easier for the departments of Christian Ministry and World Mission, but it is no less important for the other departments who will, in many ways, have to be more intentional in this regard.

It is also expedient that the lines be blurred between departments. This does not mean a doing away with departments or specialty studies. It does mean a far greater amount of collaboration between departments within a seminary and even with departments on a campus who are normally not considered relevant to theological studies. This could manifest itself in more collaboration in team-taught courses between departments that have in the past been less connected, such as church history and mission studies, systematic theology, and homiletics (Redford 2012:113). Professors in all disciplines should be looking for ways of increasing mission awareness and appropriate biblical study and thinking in the light of mission in any class taught in a seminary. Thankfully many of these things are occurring already and appear to be on the rise.
For Reflection and Discussion

How do we conceptualize our understanding and practice of hermeneutics, theology, and mission? Do we have a more linear or a more circular/spiral perspective of the integration of these concepts/disciplines?

Linear Model

God $\rightarrow$ Revelation/Bible $\rightarrow$ Hermeneutics $\rightarrow$ Theology $\rightarrow$ Mission

Spiral/Circular Model

God

$\downarrow$

Revelation/Bible

While this article has not answered all the questions it raised in the beginning, it has attempted to move towards a more holistic framework within which to develop hermeneutics. The biblical examples given reveal that frontline mission work is primary for all those who follow Jesus. It is out of this frontline mission activity that theology grows and continues on its way towards the eschaton.

Certain hermeneutical tests, such as those presented can be useful in helping to guide the forward movement of the discussion of hermeneutical
development. These tests highlighted the necessity of keeping frontline mission, theology, and the study of God’s Word together, avoiding the constant temptation to separate these into disconnected disciplines. This provides a positive challenge for the faculty of any seminary.

In all these things humility is required. Without humility there is a real risk that whatever hermeneutic is developed becomes a hermeneutic that creates static boundaries, built with the stones of ethnocentrism, theological pride, and a missionless scholasticism. True humility, on the other hand, leads to an openness in the process that allows the Holy Spirit to lead and guide God’s people as they take the gospel across cultural boundaries—and all for his glory. This is a freeing atmosphere that creates spaces for encountering God in new and exciting ways, leading everyone closer to him, his Word, to each other, and to those he came to save.

A Few Final Thoughts to Ponder and Remember:

When God spoke to Abram, He went
When God lit a bush on fire, Moses went
When God whispered in a still small voice, Elijah went
When God gave Esther an intuition, She went
When God flashed light on the road, Paul/Saul went
When God lowered a sheet, Peter went

And in the “Fullness of Time,” Jesus went!

Good hermeneutics without mission is not even possible. Theology is on the way, because God has always been on the way to save us and is on the way to take us home. That is his mission, and for that we worship and praise him!

Notes

1There are a number of good books in which the blending of theology and missiology within the global church context have been published over the last decade. Unfortunately, Seventh-day Adventists, who are uniquely global in makeup, have contributed next to nothing in this conversation. This is an area of thought Adventist should be leading out in and yet, as is too often the case, they are not involved or heard. For a good introduction to the issues, see Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland’s edited book, Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.
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The Implications of Culture on Who We Are and How We Understand the Bible and Share the Gospel

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19, 20 NLT).

From the beginning, Christianity has been a missionary movement. In response to the command of Jesus, the early disciples carried the gospel to all of the then known world in the first few centuries after Jesus’s resurrection. In our attempt to share the gospel with those who do not know Jesus in our world today, it is prudent to examine the factors that led to the spread of Christianity in those first centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Much may be gained by examining the insights gleaned from the social sciences on the impact of culture on how people understand the Bible and share the gospel.

Rodney Stark is a sociologist of religion from Baylor University who has examined the historical evidence of Christianity’s spread within the Roman Empire, particularly the sociological factors that contributed to the exponential growth of Christianity. In his book *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (1996), Stark illustrates how individual conversions via social networks of family, friends, and colleagues could lead to huge growth within the period of time Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. While Stark acknowledges the impact of the Holy Spirit, he is able to illustrate the sociological factors through which God most likely worked which resulted in the sustained and continuous growth of Christianity in the first few centuries after the death of Christ.
In Stark’s book Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome (2006), he draws on both archaeological and historical evidence to provide statistical data on religious life in the Roman Empire. In regards to the spread of Christianity, Stark points out that “the obligation to missionize is always implicit in monotheism” (4) while also mentioning that Judaism required converts to fully embrace Jewish ethnicity. “Rather than letting other ‘nations’ extol God, the Jewish leadership demanded that all ‘nations’ become fully Jewish” (6). Stark points out that the ethnic barrier this presented was likely the reason that the Roman Empire had not embraced the “God of Abraham” prior to the time of Christ. Although there were many “God-fearers” among the Romans, they remained outside Judaism for the most part. According to Stark, Christianity was fundamentally different from Judaism in this respect. Christianity offered the world “monotheism stripped of ethnic encumbrances. People of all nations could embrace the One True God while remaining people of all nations” (7).

If Adventists, as a church and as the body of Christ, are to be successful in presenting Christianity to the world, how can Christianity today be presented “stripped of its ethnic encumbrances?” Since Christians are faced with the task of sharing the gospel with every nation, kindred, tongue and people in the 21st century, it is important to ask what the role of culture is in understanding the Christian message and the church’s mission. How can the gospel be offered to others in such a way that it not only makes sense but meets their deepest needs?

Implications of Culture

In the first half of this paper I will examine the implications of culture on how people interpret reality and understand truth. Researchers today recognize that how the human brain develops and functions is inextricably linked to culture. I will begin this section by first defining culture, followed by an examination of the neuropsychological basis of culture, the neuropsychological basis of religious experience, and how culture impacts people’s understanding of both religious truths and religious experiences. Next, I will explore the relationship between language and culture and how the two are linked, each informing and reflecting the other. Then I will examine how culture and our early life experiences lay the foundation for the “basic assumptions” that guide our lives and dictate how we experience reality and interpret truth. This will be following by an examination of some of the research related to the impact of culture on the intuitive brain and the adaptive unconscious and how it influences the decisions people make. To close this first section, I will examine how
various dimensions of culture impact how people live their lives and make decisions. In the second section of this paper the impact of culture on science will be examined, followed by the impact of culture on religion.

Definitions of Culture

In their book, *Psychology and Culture* (1994), Walter Lonner and Roy Malpass point out that one can find more than 175 different definitions of culture in the social scientific literature. The fact that one can find that many different definitions is an indication that the concept of culture is a man-made concept designed to name a set of observations under investigation. For the purpose of examining the role of culture in how individuals and societies understand the Bible, it is useful to define what is meant by culture as it relates to that topic. I have chosen three definitions that I consider relevant to this topic.

The first comes from the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) of the University of Minnesota. Because Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God, communicated to us through other human beings, understanding culture from a linguistic perspective is important. CARLA is one the US Department of Education’s National Language Resource Centers. Its primary purpose is to understand the nature of language acquisition in order to increase the capacity of the US educational system to teach foreign languages. They sponsor initiatives to explore the connection between language and culture learning based on the premise that “neither culture nor language can be fully understood when taught separately from the other” (Culture and Language Learning 2016). CARLA defines culture as “as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization” (What is Culture 2016).

The second definition of culture comes from the field of cognitive science, which defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede 1984:51). In line with this second definition, Andy Clark says that the field of cognitive psychology or cognitive science attempts to understand how the mind works and how “mindware” develops (quoted in Clark 1984:3). Cognitive science is rooted in experimental psychology, which attempts to understand human consciousness and its relation to the external environment. Cognitive psychology is an interdisciplinary field, which studies cognitive processes and how they develop.

The third definition of culture suggests that culture is simply “a term invented to characterize the many complex ways in which peoples live, and which they tend to pass along to their offspring” (Lonner and Malpass 1994:7). In other words, to say something is cultural is simply to say that
it is one of the many different ways in which people have learned to live, think, and communicate. Unless one is exposed to ways other than the way one lives, the concept of culture is not really relevant.

The Neuropsychological Basis of Culture

Whether through the Bible or the still small voice that speaks within the silence of our own hearts, God communicates with us by way of the human brain. The brain is the organ of thought—a physical organ made of flesh and blood, neurons and synapses. The mind is the product of the brain and neuroscientists tell us that the mind is shaped by experience. Rhawn Joseph is one of the founders in the field of human developmental neuropsychology. His research on early environmental influences on the brain has demonstrated the profound impact of the environment on the development of the brain. He was one of the first researchers to demonstrate what is known as the neural plasticity of the brain, or the ability of the brain to physically change and adapt to environmental stimuli. He found that immature brain cells are “experience-expectant.” They require “considerable social, emotional, perceptual, and cognitive stimulation during the first several months and years of life in order to develop normally” (1999:187-203).

The brain of a human infant weighs approximately 400g at the time of birth. The cerebral cortex, or the thinking and decision-making part of the brain—the part of the brain that distinguishes humans from other mammals—is the least developed at the time of birth. In the first year of life a human infant’s brain grows to approximately 1,000g. Neuroscientists tell us that important emotional and interpersonal learning occurs during that early period of time when the brain stem and limbic system, which are the emotional brain, are in control. Louis Cozolino, professor of psychology at Pepperdine University, notes that the brain is particularly impacted by the emotional experiences that take place between an infant and its mother during this critical period of time. He says that the “quality and nature of our relationships are translated into codes within neural networks that serve as the infrastructure for both brain and mind” (2002:16). These early experiences physically shape the brain.

Ellen White uses similar language when she says that “what the child sees and hears is drawing deep lines upon the tender mind, which no after circumstances in life can entirely efface” (1954:199). In the book, The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology, psychiatrist Daniel Stern discusses how the human infant organizes and integrates these early experiences in such a way that mental structures begin to be developed. Although these mental
structures continue to be refined and modified over time, he says that between the ages of two and seven months these mental structures form what he calls a “core self.” This early sense of a core self serves as the foundation upon which later experiences are interpreted.

Perhaps the first psychologist to promote the idea that “culture fundamentally shapes thought” was the early twentieth century Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. In other words, the unique ways in which people live shapes how they think. At a time when psychologists in the West neglected the impact of the social environment on thought, Vygotsky proposed that “cognitive processes emerge from practical activity that is culturally constrained and historically developing” (Nisbett and Norenzayan 2002:10). Vygotsky developed a theory of human cultural and bio-social development that is the foundation of what is known today as cultural-historical psychology.

Neurologists view thinking as a neurologic function and focus their attention on the “the neural mechanisms necessary for thought” (Benson 1994:v). Neuropsychologists take a broader view and examine how “differences in values and social milieus sculpt the brain’s structure and function” (Park and Huang 2010:10). Through the use of neuro-imaging technology, Denise C. Park and Chih-Mao Huang have investigated how culture, or the way that different people live their lives, impacts both the structure and the function of the brain. They indicate that numerous studies point to the fact that “culture may affect neural function” (1). Neuroscientists now recognize that cognition is shaped by the various social and cultural experiences that human beings are exposed to in ways that are beyond conscious awareness.

In his book *Mindware: An introduction to the Philosophy of Cognitive Neuroscience* Andy Clark says that human beings develop what is called “nonbiological wideware,” consisting of things like writing, symbols, and various technologies to complement the activity of their brains. This “symbiosis of brain and technology” actually creates “extended cognitive systems” that are qualitatively different from those of the biological brain (2001:150). According to Clark, “the biological brain literally grows a cortical cognitive architecture suited to the specific technological environment in which it learns and matures” (153). The concept of neuroplasticity helps us see that the human brain is able to build cognitive systems and structures in response to many types of environmental input: biological, social, or technological. In the West today, the field of experimental psychology uses the term “extended cognition” when studying the impact of culture and social practices on people’s cognitive processes (Fessler and Machery n.d.:8).
Religious and Culture

Religious beliefs would fall into the category of extended cognition. Our beliefs and values are shaped by the intellectual and moral climate in which we live, even our concept of God. Gordon Kaufman says that “no individual human mind constructs the idea of God from scratch. All thinking about God and all devotion to God take place within a cultural and linguistic context in which the notion of God has already been highly developed” (1981:23). John Polkinghorne says that one’s conception of God symbolizes one’s “highest individual ideals” (1998:19). Those ideals are shaped by the culture in which people live and the communities and families into which they are born and raised. In his book Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion Lee Kirkpatrick notes the strong relationship between societal values and societal conceptions of God (2005).

Neuroscientists also recognize that religious experiences and people’s understanding of spiritual truths are impacted by the culture in which they live. Rhawn Joseph is also a leading researcher in the area of “neurotheology.” Neurotheology uses the tools of psychology and neuroscience to try to understand the neural underpinnings of religious experience. Through the use of brain imagining technology, neuroscientists have been able to identify the specific brain structures that are activated when an individual has a spiritual experience. In fact, they say that when these brain structures are hyperactivated, “‘religious’ experiences are not uncommon” (2003:9). Because of the involvement of the limbic system in religious and spiritual experiences, Joseph has referred to it as the “transmitter to God” and has written a book by that title which was published in 2001. He says that it has been known for thousands of years that certain spiritual practices can increase one’s spiritual acuity. This is because spiritual practices such as fasting and meditation activate these systems “such that what is normally filtered out is perceived” (2003:9). From a purely religious perspective, we are well aware that the distractions of life often blind us to spiritual realities. Fasting and other spiritual disciplines give us a clearer focus on the things that really matter in life. Self-denial, sacrifice, and suffering all have a similar impact and have been a part of traditional Catholic spirituality for centuries.

Two other researchers in the field of neurotheology are Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg, authors of The Mystical Mind. Their research has led them to believe that there are certain core elements of the spiritual experience, which appear to be universal (1999:5). While it appears that God uses our mental processes to “break through to us,” d’Aquili and Newberg say that our minds have been preconditioned or preprogramed in such a way that how we interpret those experiences varies a great
deal depending on our backgrounds and how those within our culture interpret these types of experiences. Thus, our neurobiological ability to perceive spiritual realities is impacted by the culture in which we live.

In 1917, Rudolph Otto coined the term “numinous” to describe what people today call religious experiences or sacred encounters (Sperry and Shafranske 2005:54, 55). According to Sperry and Shafranske, numinous or spiritual experiences may happen to anyone at any time. They have found, however, that the content of the experience is typically tailored to the psychological structures of the individual having the experience, and may only be understood or make sense to that person (55). How the experience is interpreted is highly individual and strongly influenced by the mental filters through which an individual views life.

On a similar note, it is reasonable to conclude that when individuals read the Bible, how they interpret it is also highly individualistic and strongly influenced by the mental programming through which they view life. This helps us understand why there are so many Christian denominations in existence today, all based on the same sacred Scriptures. It also helps to explain why God-fearing and committed individuals within the same denomination often disagree on various points of Scripture. Based on neuropsychological research, they are constrained by the mental filters through which they view life. This understanding should give us a much greater understanding of our need of the Holy Spirit to accurately interpret the Bible. It should also help us see the importance of studying the Scriptures and allowing them to shape how we view our world and our understanding of who God is.

Language and Culture

God can and does communicate with people in ways that do not involve language—through nature, through relationships, through symbols and rituals, through the ordering or timing of events. God’s most powerful communication was through the incarnation of his son, Jesus—through his life, his death, and his resurrection. Although some would argue that God primarily communicates with people non-verbally, he definitely communicates in language through his written word in the Bible. God also speaks through his still small voice in the silence of our own hearts.

According to Nisbett and Norenzayan, one of the most famous and earliest notions that culture influences thought and therefore language is in the linguistic relativity hypothesis or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (2002:6). In the 1950s anthropologist Edward Sapir and linguist Benjamin Whorf recognized the relationship between the vocabulary and structure of a language with patterns of thought and the cognitive constructs
inherent within culture. The premise of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is that language does not simply reflect reality but rather shapes and guides people’s perceptions of reality. The particular language spoken actually affects how one thinks (6). This can be seen in the fact that some cultures have many words to describe certain things while other cultures have few or perhaps no words at all to describe those things. For example, one culture has dozens of names for rice, another has over a hundred words for snow, and another has dozens of names for shades of brown to describe the color of cows. The ability to make these fine distinctions is an indication of what people within these cultures believe to be important.

John Walton of Wheaton College says that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. It was written to ancient Israel in the language of ancient Israel. It must be translated in order for us to understand the message. Walton suggests that when we translate a language it is not only the words that need to be translated. “Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to communicate into the framework of a culture” (Walton 2009:7). Therefore, in order to understand the message of Scripture, we must attempt to understand it in its cultural context.

The Bible teaches that people are incapable of understanding the Scriptures apart from the Holy Spirit opening their minds to the truths contained within them (1 Cor 2:14). The Bible is clearly more than a written document presenting simple irrefutable truths. It is the voice of God speaking through various men at various times and in different cultures throughout history. Language, thought, and culture are all interrelated, not only in the mind of the one to whom God spoke, but in the mind of those of us who read the Scriptures. They are the means through which God has communicated his thoughts to us. When guided by the Holy Spirit, it seems reasonable to conclude that we can learn a great deal not only from the field of theology but the fields of linguistics, neurology, anthropology, and related disciplines when it comes to understanding the Scriptures and how to communicate them most effectively.

Our “Basic Assumptions”

The research of neuropsychologists and cognitive scientists has shown that the external environment shapes our brains and impacts how people view not only the Scriptures but their personal experiences of God as well as the world around them. This begins with the early development of the brain as it is exposed to environmental stimuli, through the nature and structure of the language or languages that people are exposed to, as well as the programing of the mind which is impacted by the culture in which a person lives.
Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, professor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Massachusetts has developed a theory of mind that she calls our “basic assumptions” which reflects this neuropsychological and cognitive scientific perspective. According to her theory “At the core of our internal world, we hold basic views of ourselves and our external world” (1992:4). These basic assumptions refer to a “conceptual system, developed over time that provides us with expectations about the world and ourselves” (5). She proposes that because these assumptions form the bedrock of our conceptual system, we are often unaware of them. As a result they are rarely challenged and are resistant to change.

Psychologists use the concept of a “schema” to describe core beliefs that shape how we perceive and interpret reality. “A ‘schema’ is a mental structure that represents organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus. The use of schemas implies an active construction of reality” (Goleman 1985:28). Daniel Goleman says that our perceptions are actually interactive and therefore reflect constructed realities.

It is not enough for information to flow through the senses; to make sense of the senses requires a context that organizes the information they convey, that lends it the proper meaning. Schemas embody the rules and categories that order raw experiences into coherent meaning. All knowledge and experience is packaged in schemas. Schemas are the ghost in the machine, the intelligence that guides information as it flows through the mind. (28)

Christian parents who want their children to incorporate the biblical view of our world and of God enculturate their children with Christian teachings and practices.

It is believed that schemas operate at all levels of knowledge. “Our fundamental assumptions about the world are essentially our grandest schemas, our most abstract, generalized knowledge structures” (29). They are the ones most resistant to change because they serve as the foundation which defines our core self. Notice the following: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you talk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deut 6:6-9). God’s plan was for his laws to permeate our grandest schemas so that they influence our lives on the deepest level.

“A central premise of modern cognitive anthropology is that culture profoundly influences the contents of thought through shared knowledge
structures” (Nisbett and Norenzayan 2002:5). Cultural schemas are “patterns of basic schemas that make up the meaning system of a cultural group” (5). God’s law was the foundation of the ancient Hebrew culture. Cultural schemas guide the way people interpret their experiences. They provide a lens that enables a person to interpret and make sense of their world. Lee Kirkpatrick notes the relationship between societal values and societal conceptions of God (Kirkpatrick 2005). These societal conceptions are so deeply rooted and so fundamental that they are invisible to those within the society. The Gospels teach that it is God’s love as manifested through the life and death of Jesus that is to be the lens through which a Christian views the world.

Social psychological research has demonstrated that our minds are designed to maintain what is described as cognitive consistency. Human beings have a need for stability and coherence in what they believe. As a result, they hold onto the beliefs that are formed early in life and are naturally resistant to changing them. These early cognitions “provide the lenses through which we perceive and interpret new information” (Janoff-Bulman 1992:27). These early cognitions actually guide what we perceive and the new information that we gather (27).

The Bible as well as the Spirit of Prophecy teaches this same principle. Prov 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” In Child Guidance Ellen White says, “Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the early training of children. The lessons that the child learns during the first seven years of life have more to do with forming his character than all that it learns in future years” (1954:193). She goes on to say that virtues are to be instilled into “his opening mind” and that parents are to “begin work with the child in its infancy” (193). Studies show that people interpret both new information and the information that comes from their memories in ways that are consistent with their pre-existing schemas. “In other words, our schemas guide our perceptions, memories, and inferences” (Janoff-Bulman 1992:30). As a result, when people are confronted with contradictory information the research shows that they minimize, discount, or isolate to such an extent that their pre-existing schemas remain intact. “Cognitively, we are conservative. We tend to maintain our theories rather than change them; we interpret information so as to be schema-consistent” (37). Ellen White talks about “the bias which is given to a child in its earliest years” which “shapes the destiny either for eternal life or eternal death!” (1954:198).

Culture, the Intuitive Brain, and the Adaptive Unconscious

With increasing globalization, the business world, in particular,
coming to recognize the role of culture in the values people hold and the choices they make. Although much of the cross-cultural marketing literature focuses on differences in observed behaviors within cultures, Kastanakis and Voyer (2014) address the root causes of these differences by examining cross-cultural differences in pre-behavioral processes. They note that as long as a person’s thinking remains “culturally bound” their effectiveness in reaching people of other cultures will be limited (3). Using the research that has just been presented, they attempt to understand the conditioning effect of culture on how people perceive the world in order to “explain cross-cultural consumer behavior” and “to improve marketing research and practice” (4). They recognize that in the business world, failure to understand the impact of culture can lead to recurring market failures.

Daniel Kahneman is an Israeli-American psychologist who is considered by many to be one of the most influential psychologists in the world. Kahneman was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2002 as the result of his ground-breaking research in the psychology of judgment and decision-making. Although Kahneman is not an economist, he is credited with creating the field of behavioral economics. He and Amos Tversky reported findings that brought into question the assumption that “human beings are intrinsically rational animals” (in Samuels, Stich, and Tremoulet 1999:74). Their findings, along with those of other psychologists “sparked the growth of a major research tradition whose impact has been felt in economics, political theory, medicine, and other areas far removed from cognitive science” (74).

In his best-selling book, Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011), Kahneman uses the metaphor of System 1 and System 2 to illustrate both the “marvels as well as the flaws of intuitive thought” (10). Associative memory is at the core of System 1 and runs automatically and outside of conscious awareness. System 1 is fast whereas System 2 is slow and deliberate. System 2 involves logical thought and is “mobilized when a question arises for which System 1 does not offer an answer” (24). “System 2 believes that it is in charge and that it knows the reasons for its choices” (56). Kahneman’s research has focused primarily on the flaws of intuitive thinking, the systematic errors that occur within System 1.

According to Kahneman, our emotions and our actions are primed by events that we are not even aware of (53). He says the impact of priming, on how we think and the decisions we make, threatens our “self-image as conscious and autonomous authors of our judgments and our choices” (55). Often people are unaware of why they have made certain decisions and will attribute their decisions to unrelated but seemingly logical factors. In fact, much of the knowledge and experience that informs our intuitions is stored outside conscious awareness.
In his best-selling book *Blink, the Power of Thinking without Thinking* (2005) Malcolm Gladwell uses the concept of two different mental strategies rather than the metaphor of two systems. The first is a conscious strategy, which is logical and definitive—like Kahneman’s System 2. The second operates below the level of consciousness and is equivalent to Kahneman’s System 1. “It’s a system in which our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that it’s reaching conclusions” (Gladwell 2005: loc 105) In fact, with this system, the body seems to know and respond before the mind knows. This idea supports the premise proposed by Candace Pert in her book *Molecules of Emotion* (1997) that the mind is spread throughout the body. Our senses are the body’s window to the world and are the avenue through which we are impacted by our environment. Antonio Damasio says in his book *Descartes’ Error* that his research shows support for “the idea that mental activity, from its simplest aspects to its most sublime, requires both brain and body proper” (1994:xvii). He goes on to say that the body “may constitute the indispensable frame of reference for the neural processes that we experience as the mind” (xvi).

According to Gladwell, the capacity to know on a physical or intuitive level without yet knowing is called “the adaptive unconscious” (2005: loc 114). The brain operates most efficiently on that level. In his book *Strangers to Ourselves* Timothy D. Wilson writes that we “possess a powerful, sophisticated, adaptive unconscious that is crucial for survival in our world” (2002: loc 38). He says that its efficiency is due in large part to the fact that it is out of view. This means however, that much of who we are is inaccessible to us directly.

Our adaptive unconscious is shaped by life experiences and the culture and environment that surround us. Cozolino points out that because a great deal of learning takes place before we have the “necessary cortical systems for conscious awareness and memory . . . many of the most important aspects of our lives are controlled by reflexes, behaviors, and emotions learned and organized outside our awareness” (2002:12). As noted earlier, these early emotional experiences are deeply embedded into “neural networks that serve as the infrastructure for both brain and mind” (16).

Research has shown that emotions are indispensable to reason. In fact, a great deal of research leads us to conclude that as human beings we are first and foremost emotional beings. The decisions we make and the preferences we develop are influenced by emotion far more than most of us are willing or able to acknowledge. Benson says that our emotional responses occur at “a rapid and unconscious level, best recognized in retrospect” (1994:117). They involve many interrelated neural structures such that the impact of cultural and social relationships on emotional behavior
is “remarkably stable and resistant to change” (117). As a result, when it comes to understanding the Bible as well as interpreting our own personal religious experiences, it is crucial that we understand that our ability to interpret either correctly is impacted by the culture we are a part of as well as the early emotional experiences which are deeply embedded within the mind and brain. What is the implication of understanding the impact of culture when it comes to sharing the gospel with those of another culture? How do we avoid a “recurring market failure” when it comes to sharing the gospel?

Dimensions of Culture

While the research presented up to this points shows that there is an inextricable link between the culture in which we live and who we are as individuals, the following research shows how we are impacted by the culture in which we live. Working as a management trainer for IBM at a time when very little was written or known on the impact of culture, Geert Hofstede founded and managed the IBM Personnel Research Department. Hofstede was interested in understanding the impact of culture on work performance and collected data from more than 100,000 employee opinion surveys in order to understand this.

In his analysis of the data, Hofstede found four empirically based dimensions of culture, which define the mental software of individuals within a culture (1984: loc 746). These four dimensions formed the basis of his theory of cultural dimensions and describe how culture impacts the values of individuals within a society as well as the society as a whole. His theory also describes the relationship between values and behavior. The four empirically-based dimensions of culture that emerged were (1) power distance or strength of the social hierarchy, (2) collectivism verses individualism, (3) masculinity verses femininity or task orientation verses person-orientation, and (4) uncertainty avoidance (G. Hofstede, G. J. Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Later he added a fifth dimension—long-term orientation, and in 2010 he added a sixth dimension—indulgence versus self-restraint. In 1984 Hofstede published his findings in a book entitled Culture’s Consequences. Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions has been foundational in establishing a major research tradition in the field of cross-cultural psychology.

A third edition to his book was published in 2010 and was coauthored by his son, Gert Jan Hofstede and a researcher from Bulgaria named Michael Minkov. This book is entitled Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. In it, culture is described as mental programming or software of the mind. In line with the research of cognitive psychologists, the
authors say that “every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout the person’s lifetime” (loc 303). The origin of these mental programs are “the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences” (loc 312). Similar to what Ellen White says, Hofstede et al. recognized that the social environment with the most profound impact on mental programming is the family. This is followed by the wider community of friends, neighbors, school, and eventually the workplace. He points out that these programs do not dictate behavior but rather indicate “what reactions are likely and understandable, given one’s past” (loc 312).

A person’s mental programs develop as shared rules that enable the community or group to thrive. Because the community values those things that enable it to survive, Hofstede et al. proposes that values are at the core of culture. As a result, values are the stable element in culture, much more so than behavior or practices. Because of this, comparative research on culture should start with the measurement of values (Hofstede et al. 2010: loc 694).

The first cultural dimension identified by Hofstede is the power distance dimension. This dimension deals with how inequality between groups of people is handled. The researchers noted that “founders of religions have dealt explicitly with questions of power and inequality” (loc 1476). In 2500 BC Confucius “maintained that the stability of society was based on unequal relationships between people” (loc 1476). Confucius taught that these “relationships contain mutual and complementary obligations” (loc 1480), and to this day “Confucius’s ideas have survived as guidelines for proper behavior for Chinese people” (loc 1480). “People in these countries accept and appreciate inequality but feel that the use of power should be moderated by a sense of obligation” (loc 1485). Most Asian countries today are high power distance countries.

Luc Ferry in his book A Brief History of Thought points out that “the Greek world was fundamentally an aristocratic world, a universe organized as a hierarchy in which those endowed by nature should in principle be ‘at the top’, while the less endowed saw themselves occupying inferior ranks” (2011:72). The Greek city-state was founded on the belief that human beings were not created equal. Greek thought was that there existed “a natural hierarchy” of plants, animals and of men. One can see this reflected on the island of Cyprus to this day. Oscar Osindo, a colleague of mine from Kenya, spent several years working on the island of Cyprus, between 2007 and 2009. Before going to Cyprus there was some discussion as to whether or not it would be wise for Oscar to take his family there because of the prejudice of the people of Cyprus toward black Africans. Oscar is Kenyan and as a Kenyan he is not threatened by
the prejudice of other people. According to Oscar, Kenyans are a resilient people who survive even in difficult places. Nonetheless, living on the island of Cyprus was challenging. Cyprus is a very stratified society, with the local Greek people, the Cypriots, being at the top of the social order. According to Oscar, the British and other white inhabitants of the island were next. Following them were Filipino and other Asians workers who served as domestic help. Black Africans, not all Africans are black, were at the very bottom of the social order. According to Oscar, black Africans did not even qualify as domestic workers but had to work in the fields or the forests in the interior of the island. As repulsive as this sounds to Americans or others from low PDI countries, this is a lived reality on the island of Cyprus in the 21st century. According to Oscar and his friend Beryl Esembe, a Cameroonian sociologist and anthropologist active in the global fight against human trafficking movement who was trained and is currently living in Cyprus, Africans are nonetheless able to win the respect of Cypriots if they seem wealthy or “chiefly” or are holding a prestigious position or travels internationally. My friend Oscar is a gifted and culturally sensitive man who was able to establish a place of respect and honor for himself and his family on the island of Cyprus. He and his family met many good people and were able to enjoy their time there and would be willing to live there again. Oscar understands culture and understands how to connect with people whose culture and values are different from his own. He also has the ability to find areas of commonality that allow him to enter their world.

According to Ferry, Christianity introduced the “notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that people were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance.” While the Greek world embraced a natural order of being—one in which it was clear that all men were not created equal and that talents and abilities are, indeed, unequally distributed, this belief in a natural hierarchy had no legitimacy at all for Christians and had no bearing whatsoever on an individual’s inherent value (2011:73). Christianity proposed that how one uses the abilities one has is more important than the abilities themselves. According to Ferry, Christian thought abandoned the concept of the natural order of inequality and embraced the concept of the equality of all human beings. “Human dignity is the same for everyone, whatever their actual inequalities, because it is connected to our freedom to choose how to act, not upon our innate endowments” (73). According to Ferry, “for the first time in human history, liberty rather than nature had become the foundation of morality” (74).

Holstede et al. noted a relationship between language and present-day mental software regarding power-distance. European countries that
speak Latin-based languages such as France, Italy, Romania, Portugal, and Spain; are all rooted in the common history of once being a part of the Roman Empire. The same patterns was carried to Latin-American countries colonized by these European countries. All these countries score from medium to high on the power-distance scale.

Germanic languages are spoken throughout the rest of Europe—in countries that were considered barbaric in Roman days. The people within these areas of Europe were independent and for the most part free from the control of Rome. Christianity emerged during this time in history. Christ taught by word and example the equality of all people and the virtue of poverty. He abolished the religious hierarchy of his day and taught the priesthood of all believers. It is conceivable to at least partially attribute the Protestant Reformation to the mental software of the independent-thinking Luther whose German culture predisposed him to challenge authority. Perhaps this can help us understand why Protestantism took root in the Germanic and English-speaking countries of Europe but was accepted by only a small proportion of people in the countries of Europe speaking Latin or Romantic languages. Catholicism maintained a strong hold in France, Italy, Romania, Portugal, and Spain throughout the reformation and is the dominate religion in much of Latin America. According to Holstede and his fellow researchers, “The Roman Catholic Church has maintained the hierarchical order of the Roman Empire; the same holds for the Eastern Orthodox churches, whereas Protestant denominations to various degrees are nonhierarchical. Traditionally Protestant nations tend to score lower on PDI than Catholic or Orthodox nations” (2010: loc 1494).

The Impact of Culture

It is easy to fail to recognize the impact of culture in how reality is perceived. This is true in both science and religion, where both attempt to understand reality—one the physical reality in which people live day to day and the other ultimate reality. Hofstede says that living within one’s own culture is “like the air we breathe, while another culture is like water—and it takes special skills to be able to survive in both elements” (2010: loc 616). Developing the skills to survive in the environment that one was born and raised in is like breathing air; the skill needed is hardly recognized at all. Understanding how the intuitive brain and the adaptive unconscious work helps us understand precisely why culture is like breathing—much of it is outside of conscious awareness. It is only under unique circumstances that one’s own culture becomes visible. In this section I will examine the impact of culture on how both scientific and religious truth are perceived. Each creates a unique culture of its own, influenced by the larger culture that surrounds it.
The Impact of Culture on Science

Many people see science as the objective and unbiased pursuit of knowledge and truth. Because of the success of science in medicine, technology, engineering, physics, chemistry and other areas that have brought practical benefits to people’s everyday lives, people have come to trust science and the scientific method. In fact, William James wrote in 1902 that “science in many minds is genuinely taking the place of a religion” (2002:136). However, in his book, *Science and Theology*, John Polkinghorne points out that science is practiced within the cultural context by a community of scientists and that scientific inquiry takes place within the cultural context of that community. He says that as in every society, “this implies that there are communal expectations and ways of thinking” which are both implicit and explicit (1998:12). Such implicit and often unrecognized cultural and social expectations have a much stronger impact on scientific discovery for the very fact that they are unrecognized. Polkinghorne points out that scientific discovery is always socially molded. While most scientists fail to recognize the strong role that social forces play in how data is both gathered and interpreted “sociologists of knowledge” propose that “the invisible college of scientists reaches certain conclusions, less because nature actually takes this particular form, but because the college has unconsciously decided to describe nature in this way” (12). Science is very much impacted by society and culture.

Hofstede et al. recognized that for any “given period certain assumptions called paradigms dominate a scientific field and constrain the thinking of the scientists in that field” (2010: loc 692). While science has provided a reliable way to understand the natural world and has enabled human beings to gain control over many of the invisible and unconquerable enemies of the past, Edward Golub says in his book *The Limits of Medicine*, that “a common misconception about science is that it is value free” (1994:144). He goes on to say that “nothing could be further from the truth: The facts that come from scientific experiments are always understood within the context of the assumptions the experimenter made when designing the experiment” (145). “Science is really a value-laden intellectual exercise in which the participants are constantly striving to turn the ‘facts’ into ‘truth’” (145). As can be seen from history, science is always a part of its time. “Things are only understood in the context of what is already known” (151). What are referred to as “scientific facts” must therefore be understood within the context of the prevailing beliefs and values of the time.
The Impact of Culture on Religion

David Hay is an empirical scientist and the former director of the Religious Experience Research Centre at Oxford University who has studied the religious experiences of ordinary people. Hay reports in his 2005 book entitled *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit* that religious experiences are common. He points out that the Bible teaches us to listen to the voice of God in our lives, to place ourselves in his presence, and to wait upon him (Hay 2005:33). However, our Western culture fails to acknowledge the reality of our spiritual natures along with the spiritual experiences of ordinary people. We live in a culture that holds to the scientific worldview in which the spiritual life is viewed as either nonexistent or pathological (Goleman 1988:160). It is no wonder that those from Western cultures struggle with anything related to the supernatural world since Western worldviews simply filter the supernatural out.

The cultural and social climate today can certainly blind people to the truths that God is trying to communicate to them. In his study of the spiritual experiences of ordinary people in the British population, Hay found that 79% reported having some experience that led them to believe that there was something more than the material world that they lived in. Hay refers to the work of the French sociologist Yves Lambert who has described the development in Europe of what he calls an “autonomous, diffused religiosity, detached from Christianity” (Hay 2005:24). Hay believes this trend is the result of the failure of the Christian Church to provide a cognitive framework for ordinary people to interpret their religious experiences.

Colleen Ward says that culture influences both the experience and interpretation of various altered states of consciousness. She says that altered states of consciousness “are extremely common on a cross-cultural basis” (1994:60). In one anthropological study conducted (Bourguignon and Evascu) in 1977 of 488 societies, 437 or 90% “displayed naturally occurring trance or possession states” (in Ward 1994:60). Yet Western societies typically see these as pathological or evil. Culture definitely impacts how these experiences are interpreted. Goleman, Sperry, Hay, and others have noted that Western people are often reluctant to share their experiences of God with even spiritual leaders because of their fear of being seen as mentally unstable or worse yet, demonically influenced. The Western or scientific worldview filters out supernatural or miraculous events reported in the New Testament and also in their own experience. When the average Western Christian encounters spirit possession either in the Bible or in real life they do not have the “cognitive schemas” to allow them to understand the experience. Their “internalized schemas guide the
processing of information” making it difficult to actually see the realities that are taught in Scripture—realities that other cultures are able to see (Pérez-Arce 1999:584).

Both the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White testify to the truths that are now coming to be understood from the social sciences related to how the human mind perceives reality and understands truth as well as how the mind clings to beliefs and is resistant to changing them. The cultural and social climate that the disciples lived in blinded them to the truths that Jesus tried to communicate to them prior to his death. This can be seen in the third chapter of Acts of the Apostles where Ellen White describes the discouragement of the disciples after the death of their beloved Master. She says that Jesus had “several times attempted to open the future to His disciples” yet they had failed to grasp what he was saying (1911:25). While Jesus had stated plainly that he was to rise on the third day, “they were perplexed to know what He meant. . . . All seemed vague and mysterious to them” (26, emphasis mine). After his resurrection Jesus remained on earth for forty days to prepare his disciples for the work that he had committed to them and to explain “that which heretofore they had been unable to comprehend” (26, emphasis mine). Note that the text says that they were previously unable to understand what he was saying. It does not say that they were unwilling. It was only in light of what had happened that Jesus was able to talk to his disciples about “the prophecies concerning His advent, His rejection by the Jews, and His death, showing that every specification of these prophecies had been fulfilled” (26). The Scriptures tell us that Jesus opened their understanding “that they might understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45, emphasis mine).

Although the Jewish nation possessed the clearest revelation of God’s plan of salvation for mankind, they had interpreted the Scriptures in such a way that they expected the Messiah to sit on the earthly throne of David. The Jewish nation had been conquered by foreign powers and the throne of David had been lost due to their disobedience and infidelity. As a result, the culture of the Jewish people revolved around the meticulous keeping of the law and the maintenance of a wall of separation between themselves and people of other nations. Dr. Janoff-Bulman examined the basic assumptions that people held in light of traumatic events in their lives. She found that when human beings experience trauma, their basic assumptions were challenged (1992:51). The crucifixion of Jesus induced an “intense psychological crisis” in the minds of the disciples. According to Janoff-Bulman, it is in situations such as this that basic assumptions are not only challenged but are shattered. It was only when the disciple’s basic assumptions had been shattered that they were able to reevaluate the life and death of Jesus, enabling them to understand his words and the meaning of his sacrifice.
Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to understand the impact of culture on who we are and how we understand the Bible with the goal of being able to present the truths contained within the Bible to people of cultures different from our own. We began our attempt to understand the impact of culture by first looking at three different definitions of culture. In order to understand how we have developed the necessary skills to live within our own particular culture, I presented the neuropsychological basis of culture, and how the mind develops around experience. Early environmental influences are actually built into the cognitive structures that define our minds. In examining the relationship between language, thought, and culture, it is evident that culture permeates not only our thought processes but is reflected in the very structure of the language we speak. The programming of the mind occurs as we absorb the world around us and it becomes a part of who we are.

Looking at social psychological research it has been suggested that all people develop basic assumptions early in life, which then guide their perspective on life. Social scientific research tells us that these early basic assumptions are resistant to change. Ellen White agrees and says that “those of mature age are generally as insensible to new impressions as is the hardened rock, but youth is impressionable” (1954:199).

With the increasing globalization of the world, it is not only Christians who are concerned with the impact of culture. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov’s thorough examination of cross-cultural differences and how they are reflected in the values people hold and the decisions they make is extremely relevant to Christians, particularly since Christianity is about values and making a decision for Christ. Hofstede and his fellow researchers were able to delineate various dimensions of culture and how they impact the ways people think and relate to one another. Understanding each of these dimensions will further our understanding of how people of various cultures will understand and value the stories presented in the Bible. In presenting the historical development of the power distance dimension of culture, Hofstede et al. showed how strong culture is and how core values are extremely resistant to change. Since culture is a concept created to reflect the various ways in which human beings live their lives then one may conclude from the research presented in this section that the various ways that people around the world live their lives and view the world is a part of their neurobiological makeup. In other words, culture is deeply etched into every person’s soul.

In conclusion, I presented the impact of culture on people’s understanding of scientific and religious truth. Although the birth of the
scientific era has contributed significantly to our understanding of the natural world and has dramatically improved the quality of our lives, Polkinghorne says that science should not be perceived “as dealing with clear and indubitable facts” but should rather be seen as “the attainment of increasingly closer approximations to the truth about physical process” (1998:16, 17). Polkinghorne sees science and theology as “partners in the great human quest to understand reality” (20). For science, that reality is the physical world, a reality that people transcend and can put to experimental tests. With theology, that reality is God, a reality that transcends human beings and can only be known as God chooses to reveal himself to us. In his book *Science and Theology* Polkinghorne says that the Bible is the record to God’s unveiling of himself to humanity (18). Nonetheless, every person interprets the Bible in light of their own personal and cultural framework.

The cultural knowledge and social experience an individual carries provide the interpretive frames that guide their reasoning and problem-solving processes. Because these internalized schemas guide the processing of information, both scientific and religious, the more entrenched a belief, value, or social role, the more difficult it is to change that schema, even when new and convincing information is provided. This happens in the scientific world as well as in the religious world.

Because culture is usually invisible to those living within it and only becomes visible in relation to other cultures, it is easy to ignore culture or write it off. No one ever recognizes their own accent. Floyd W. Rudwim says that if “you want to study human psychology, you must study cultures. Humans always come enculturated. There is no such thing as a ‘natural’ person” (1994:56). He likens culture to “the smallest roots of trees, fragile yet capable of splitting bedrock, trivial yet necessary for sustaining towering, mature individuals and whole forests. It is ubiquitous yet invisible” (55). In writing about the cultural impact of racism James Jones says that the struggle against racism has been embedded in the African American soul and that it “lurks constantly as a force” that provides meaning for who they are and who they can and will become (1994:21). Unless people see culture contrasted against another different culture they often fail to recognize it, yet it is an extremely powerful force in how all people perceive reality and live in the world.

As we examine the impact of culture in light of our goal of sharing the gospel with people of other cultures, we can see that the role of culture in the values people hold and the choices they make is even more relevant in a religious sense than it is in a business sense. While culture impacts values, much of the cross-cultural marketing literature has focused on differences in observed behaviors within cultures. Unfortunately, this has often been true in missions as well. According to Hofstede, individuals
and societies may change the outer superficial levels of culture—the visible part of cultures. Yet change on the level of values is very slow (2010: loc 559). Hofstede goes as far as to say that national values “should be considered given facts, as hard as a country’s geographical position or its weather” (loc 564). They are extremely resistant to change. And for many societies, particularly Muslim societies, national and religious values are one and the same.

Kastanakis and Voyer found that as long as a person’s thinking remains “culturally bound” their effectiveness in reaching people of other cultures will be limited (2014:3). Failure to recognize and understand the impact of culture on religious beliefs and values can lead to “recurring market failures” just as surely in missions as it does in business.

Understanding the values that guide how people spend their money is far simpler than understanding the values that define their relationship with God or the values that impact their interpretation of Scripture. Whether through mission work or soul winning or interpreting a biblical passage, when people are confronted with an idea that goes against their cultural norms they are confronted with the rules that govern their society making it very difficult for them to go against what they have learned and been taught.

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Hermeneutics of Slavery: A “Bible-Alone” Faith and the Problem of Human Enslavement

Not long ago, while driving on the freeway to Chicago, I noticed an old family van, the back door of which was plastered with all sorts of stickers bearing religious messages. One of these, prominently displayed at the center of the hatch, boldly stated: “The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!” It was obvious to me that the owner of the van took the Bible seriously and conscientiously adhered to its directives. Such devotion to the normative text of Christianity should certainly be applauded. After all, I myself am a devoted Christian who accepts the Bible as an inspired document, which is normative for Christianity. I read my Bible on a regular basis, accept its teachings, and attempt to live up to its standards. As I passed the van I looked at the driver and our eyes met. I wondered, if we ever had the chance to meet and talk, just the two of us, both committed to the Word of God, how much would we really agree on? Most likely, it would not be much. Apart from the general beliefs that all Christians share, such as that God exists, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, we would most likely find plenty to disagree on. Unfortunately, these disagreements could preclude our fellowshipping together as Christians, even though the Bible is at the core of our belief system.

The fact that my hypothetical meeting with the driver of the van would most likely result in various disagreements—perhaps even strong disagreements—shows the limitations of the truism: “The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!” While such a declaration may initially convey the impression of deep piety, it ultimately proves to be a hollow and selfish premise, which promises much but does not deliver. This is because a simplistic approach to Scripture does not take into consideration the very
complex set of conditions and circumstances that guide the human en-
counter with the Word of God.

It is true that, on the one hand, the overall message of the Scriptures
is simple and may be understood by all; namely, that God created the
world, that sin disrupted the relationship of God with humanity, that
through Jesus Christ God set in motion a plan of reconciliation, and that
one day Jesus will come back to take his children home. This is not to
say that Christians always agree on teachings of the Scripture that can
be described as “plain.” Some arrive at opposite conclusions, even on
such plain scriptural truths as the Second Coming of Christ. A deeper and
prayerful study may lead to a discovery of specific doctrinal precepts that
may guide a community of believers into a greater knowledge of God
and result in, for example, a Trinitarian confession of God. On the other
hand, however, it must also be acknowledged that the Bible was written
over a period of about 1,500 years and addressed a variety of peoples and
cultures separated from our time by two or three millennia. As such, the
Scriptures also contain pronouncements that are difficult to interpret. This,
in turn, leads to divergent interpretations and strongly held opinions. It
is these difficult-to-interpret concepts that cause disagreements among
Christians and that would likely lead to disagreement between the driver
of the van and myself. Thus, while the overall message of the Bible may be
considered “simple,” human interaction with the Word of God cannot be
described as simplistic. “Very often, people confuse simple with simplistic.
The nuance is lost on most” (Jensen 2012:12).

Encountering such issues, thoughtful Christians are forced to ask ques-
tions such as these: Why do I interpret a particular biblical passage in this
way and my fellow pew dweller interprets it in another? How do I know
that my interpretation of a particular, difficult passage is the correct one?
What if what I think the text means actually means something different?
To what extent am I reading my own ideas into the text? Such questions
make the slogan “The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it” too simplis-
tic to embrace.

Even a perfunctory examination of Christian history reveals that
the problem I encountered on my way to Chicago constitutes a micro-
representation of a historical phenomenon, which has occurred with
increasing intensity among Christians since the death of the apostles.
Christian history is littered with disagreements over the interpretation of
the biblical message; disagreements that often led to schisms, persecutions,
excommunications, wars (some of which lasted decades), much killing,
and many other atrocities. It seems that most people involved in such
conflicts would agree that they were basing their particular point of
view on the teachings of Bible. One of the longest and most destructive
religio-political conflicts in European history was what became known as
the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which resulted in millions of human
casualties, famines, destruction of commerce and manufacturing, as well
as stagnation of intellectual life. The ultimate result was that “religion was
greatly maimed” (Walker 1970:389–396). Another example is the conflict
that resulted in the soaking of American soil with millions of gallons of
American blood, namely, the American Civil War (1861–1865), fought by
both sides believing they were following the Bible.

**Hermeneutical Foundations of the Pro-Slavery Position**

It is well documented that the causes of the American Civil War are
historically complex and cannot be easily reduced to a single phenomenon.
Various reasons have been suggested that led to the Civil War, including deep
distrust between North and South, as well as different economic and social
situations; however, the major reason was slavery (Anderson 2004:5–8; see
also Farmer 2008; Randall and Donald 1961). There appears to be little
doubt, however, that religious concerns flowing from a particular way
of reading the Bible were at the root of Southern Christianity’s defense
of slavery as a biblically and morally sanctioned practice that could not,
and should not, be abolished. There were, no doubt, Southern Christians
who defended slavery in an effort to be faithful to the Scriptures, even as
there were others who simply found in the Bible a ready defense of their
financial enterprise. Thus, at the beginning of a foundational Christian
pro-slavery document, “A Southern Address to Christendom,” which
purposed to answer the question “Is slavery a sin?” are found these words:

In answering this question, as a Church, let it be distinctly born in
mind that the only rule of judgment is the written word of God. The
Church knows nothing of the intuitions of reason or the deductions
of philosophy, except those reproduced in the Sacred Canon. She has a
positive constitution in the Holy Scriptures, and has no right to utter a
single syllable upon any subject, except as the Lord puts words in her
mouth. She is founded, in other words, upon express revelation. Her
creed is an authoritative testimony of God, and not a speculation, and
what she proclaims, she must proclaim with the infallible certitude of
faith, and not with the hesitating assent of an opinion. (Smith, Handy,
and Loetschner 1963:206, emphasis in text)

This statement sets a hermeneutical foundation for the Southern way
of reading the Bible. For the Southerners, the Scriptures were to be read
in the plainest way possible, with the husks of human reason, culture,
philosophy and all other influences peeled away. Accordingly, because
the Bible never condemned slavery, the Southerners considered the
abolitionist cause unbiblical, and the fact that slavery was not practiced in the North a result of shifting cultural trends rather than a position founded on the Scriptures. James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862), a famous Southern Presbyterian minister, theologian, religious writer, and professor of theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina, persuasively expressed this sentiment when he stated that Christian beliefs must be founded only upon the explicit Word of God “and not a speculation” (quoted in Noll 1998:64, emphasis in text). The abolitionist position was, for him, an example of such “speculation,” based on culture rather than on the explicit teaching of the Scriptures. Thus, he did not hesitate to utter strong words of condemnation for the abolitionist cause:

The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and Slaveholders; they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground. Christianity and Atheism the combatants, and progress of humanity is at stake. (Thornwell, in Genovese 1995:37)

Similarly, the influential Episcopal bishop Henry Hopkins argued that it was impossible to sustain an abolitionist cause without an extra-biblical appeal to modern cultural trends. The Bible, he asserted, “sanction[ed]” the practice of slavery, “so long as it [was] administered in accordance with the precepts laid down by the Apostles” (1864:5). Anti-slavery campaigners, he argued, were delusory and engaged in “a willful or conscious opposition to the truth.” These people, he charged, were seduced by “the feelings of a false philanthropy, which palliate[d], if it [could] not excuse, their dangerous error.” The abolitionists, he believed, did not know how to study their Bibles or how to be faithful to its teachings. Consequently, they opened themselves to the influence of “the newspapers, the novel, and the magazine” (17). On the contrary, he argued, the teachings of Scripture on the matter of slavery are “plain,” and “who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God, and . . . invent for ourselves a ‘higher law’ than those holy Scriptures which are given to us as ‘a light to our feet and a lamp to our paths,’ in the darkness of a sinful and a polluted world?” (16). “The teachings of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures are so plain, righteous, consistent, and palpable,” argued John Bell Robinson, “that I cannot exercise a sufficient stretch of charity towards such men to believe them sincere. But infidelity is at the bottom of the whole scheme of abolitionism.” Thus the anti-slavery ministers who “do not understand such plain teachings,” he concluded emphatically, “are not fit for the Gospel ministry, and should be silenced for their ignorance” (1863:91, 96).
No less strong in his convictions was Charles B. Hodge (1797–1878) the most distinguished representative of the famous Princeton School of Theology, founded in 1812 as a protest against the encroachment of theological liberalism, which undermined the authority of Scripture (Cairns 1996:479). Charles B. Hodge, a deontologist who believed that being right in the eyes of God meant strict adherence to divinely established practices without consideration for outcomes or consequences. His support for slavery proceeded from the deeply held conviction that slave holding was in accordance with divine law (Torbett 2006:75). This conviction arose from his high regard for Scripture as the complete, infallible, and inerrant revelation of God. In his “Bible Argument on Slavery” article published in the monumental, 900-page, pro-slavery volume Cotton Is King he wrote: “We recognize no authoritative rule of truth and duty but the word of God” (Hodge 1857:480). Thus, anything that could only be established by some “abstract principles,” such as the abolitionist cause, could not be “truth.” “Men are too nearly upon a par to their powers of reasoning, and ability to discover truth,” he wrote, “to make the conclusions of one mind an authoritative rule for others. It is our object, therefore, not to discuss the subject of slavery upon abstract principles, but to ascertain the scriptural rule of judgment and conduct in relation to it” (480). The abolitionist cause, he believed, was based on “mere impulse of feeling, and a blind imitation” of cultural trends, especially those coming from England, rather than on the Bible itself (Hodge 1860:842).

This brief review of the pro-slavery hermeneutical position makes it clear that Southerners viewed the abolitionist position as antithetical to the very Word of God and God’s established order, influenced more by modern culture than the Bible. They claimed that “the only rule of judgment is the written word of God” (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206), and the only safe hermeneutic a conscientious adherence to the “the plain and obvious teachings, of both Old and New Testament,” which “are given with such irresistible force as to carry conviction to every mind, except those wedded to the theory of a ‘Higher Law’ than the Law of God” (Elliott 1860:xiii). The “Higher Law,” of course, was a reference to the abolitionists’ conjecture that, while permitting the practice, the God of Scripture would, in essence, oppose slavery. For the pro-slavery group, such a belief was based on human philosophy rather than the Word of God. The only way to counter (and destroy) abolitionism, it was argued, was to strictly adhere to the plain teachings of Bible on the matter. Thus, the noted Presbyterian theologian, Robert Lewis Dabney, wrote: “Here is our policy, then, to push the Bible argument continually, to drive abolitionism to the wall, to compel it to assume an anti-Christian position. By doing so we compel the whole Christianity of the North to array itself on our side”
James Henley Thornwell agreed when he wrote that the “church is not at liberty to speculate [regarding slavery]... When she speaks, it must be in the name of the Lord, and her only argument is *Thus it is written*” (1873:384, emphasis in text). James Stirling, a British scholar who visited the Southern states during the 1850s, puzzled over this. He wrote: “How those who adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and consider every direction contained in its pages as applicable at all times to all men, are to reconcile these facts with modern anti-slavery notions, it is, thank goodness, no business of mine to find out” (1857:120).

### The Biblical Case for Slavery

Having established their hermeneutic as based on “the plain and obvious teachings” of the Bible, and rejecting all traces of human reasoning, philosophy, contemporary cultural trends and “abstract principles,” Southern pro-slavery theologians proceeded to make a biblical case for slavery. They began by addressing the abolitionist argument that slavery was sinful. Their answer was simple: standing on the foundation of the written Word of God, they asserted that the Church had “no authority to declare Slavery to be sinful,” as nowhere did the Bible, “either directly or indirectly, condemn the relation of master and servant as incompatible with the will of God.” To argue the opposite was to hold in contempt the “naked testimony of God” (Thornwell, in Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:384). “Opposition to slavery,” they argued, “has never been the off-spring of the Bible” and thus slavery cannot be considered sinful (393; Hodge 1860:849).

In the earliest pages of the Scripture, they argued, God established human hierarchical order when he declared, through the inspired mouth of Noah, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gen 9:25). “May it not be said in truth,” wrote E. N. Elliott, “that God decreed this institution before it existed; and has he not connected its existence with prophetic tokens of special favor, to those who should be slave owners or masters? He is the same God now, that he was when he gave these views of his moral character to the world” (1860:463). We should not be surprised when pro-slavery theologians taught that the patriarchs, most notably Abraham, not only did not condemn slavery but actually owned slaves who were “purchased with his money” (Gen 17:13) (Hodge 1860:859). Did not Job, the man whom God said “there is no one on earth like him” also own slaves? (Job 1:3). Moreover, was not slave ownership codified in the Ten Commandments? By commanding slave-owners to give their slaves a day of rest, the fourth commandment indisputably supported the institution of slavery, as did the tenth, which commanded...
against the coveting others’ slaves. Joining the debate and offering a Jewish perspective, Rabbi M. J. Raphall argued that the tenth commandment places slaves:

under the same protection as any other species of lawful property. . . . That the Ten Commandments are the word of God, and as such, of the very highest authority, is acknowledged by Christians as well as by Jews. . . . How dare you, in the face of the sanction and protection afforded to slave property in the Ten Commandments—how dare you denounce slaveholding as a sin? When you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job—the men with whom the Almighty conversed, with whose names he emphatically connects his own most holy name, and to whom He vouchsafed to give the character of ‘perfect, upright, fearing God and eschewing evil’ . . . —that all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy? (1859:28, 29)

If the Ten Commandments, the foundation of the moral law of God, endorsed slavery, how could Christians argue against it? Moreover, did not the Levitical law regulate rather than abolish slavery? In Lev 25:39–46, they asserted, Moses clearly implied that slave ownership was part of the human condition. All Israelites, including priests, were permitted to buy and own slaves (Lev 22:10–11; Num 31:25–26). While Israelites were never to be sold as slaves—they could only be treated as hired workers and released at the time of Jubilee—foreign slaves could be purchased and held for life. Furthermore, slave owners were not to “rule over fellow Israelites ruthlessly,” suggesting that ruthless rulership over foreign slaves was not necessarily an evil practice (Lev 25:46).

From the New Testament, pro-slavery theologians observed that while Jesus had many opportunities to speak against slavery, he did not condemn it. In Matt 8:10, for example, Jesus never questioned the right of the centurion to own a slave. Instead, he healed the slave and commended the centurion for his faith: “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” Furthermore, he often used slavery to illustrate his teachings. Many of his parables featured the theme of masters and servants. For example, “Suppose one of you has a slave (doulos) plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’?” (Luke 17:7). Considering this lack of condemnation of slavery from Jesus, it is not surprising that slave owners, believing that non-condemnation translated into approval, at times used Jesus’ own teachings to instruct their slaves on obedience to their masters (Northup 1968:94).

Furthermore, pro-slavery theologians asserted that the apostles also did not condemn slavery. Did not Paul teach that each person “should
retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him” (1 Cor 7:17)? And did he not instruct slaves to not “let it trouble” them if they were slaves when “called” by God (v. 21)? Moreover, rather than being troubled by the plight of slaves, Paul appeared to emphasize spiritual equality among believers, asserting that all were “baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free” (1 Cor 12:13). Thus, Gal 3:28 did not refer to the social situation of slaves, but rather, to the salvation available to all. Accordingly, Paul instructed slaves to “obey [their] earthly masters . . . and serve them wholeheartedly” (Eph 6:5–9); to “consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God’s name and our teaching may not be slandered” (1 Tim 6:1–2); and to “be subject to their masters . . . so that in every way they [would] make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2:9–10).

These passages formed the foundation for the Southern theologian’s opposition to abolitionism. While they conceded that Scripture regulated slavery, and thus slaves in Christian homes enjoyed special privileges, they did not believe that Scripture condemned slavery. Thus, they concluded, the owner-slave relationship was not dissolved in the New Testament, as was the case, for example, with polygamy. While God tolerated polygamy during Old Testament times, this changed in the New Testament. “That Christ did give a new law on this subject,” argued Hodge, “is abundantly evident;” however, this certainly was not the case with slavery (1860:860). Similarly, Richard Furman, an influential Baptist minister who initially opposed slavery but was converted by the force of biblical arguments, stated:

The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precepts and example. . . . Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian Church. . . . In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions. (in Roger 1985:277, 278–279)

What of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” proclaimed by Christ (Matt 7:12)? A conventional approach would suggest that such a principle would certainly advocate against slavery, as no human being would want to be treated as a slave. Not so for the pro-slavery theologians. In fact, these theologians advocated that, rather than abolishing slavery, the Golden Rule established it. Ending slavery, they argued, could harm the established religious, social, and economic order, and could potentially destroy society, especially as
slavery had been divinely instituted (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206). Thus Dabney wrote: “I cannot conceive of any duty arising from the command to love my neighbor as myself which compels me to inflict a ruinous injury on that neighbor, and such would be immediate freedom to the slave” (in Johnson 1903:68). Abolitionism would also be harmful to former slaves, who could not function in a civilized society and would most likely meet the fate of the Native Americans (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005:621). Furthermore, “the Golden Rule demands that free men ask themselves what they would consider reasonable and just if they were slaves” (621). Thornwell asserted: “We are not bound to render unto them what they might in fact desire. Such a rule would transmute morality into caprice.” Instead, masters must grant their slaves that which is “just and equal,” namely, to continue the master-slave relationship established by God (621).

Accordingly, pro-slavery theologians argued, slaves were to be grateful for their role in the grand scheme established by the “perfectly just God” (622). “The Africans of this country,” stated William A. Smith, “in common with minors, imbeciles, and uncivilized persons, have a right to be governed and protected, and to such means of physical comfort and moral improvement as are necessary and compatible with their providential condition” (622). Considering the spiritual and social conditions of the “savages” in their homeland of Africa, the pro-slavery theologians asserted, “we cannot but accept it as a gracious Providence that they have been brought in such numbers to our shores, and redeemed from the bondage of barbarism and sin” (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:209). “We all know,” wrote Kate Cumming, “that the negro is free and as a slave. In the latter capacity he is better, morally and physically, than in the former, and he is much more respected in his place. Who is it that can not relate story after story of the degradation of the negro in the North... Why, slavery is heaven to it in comparison” (2015:158). While abuse of slaves certainly occurred, such situations were isolated and needed to be addressed; however, this was not a reason for war. Instead, Northern politicians would do much better to legislate “for the good of their country and all in it,” including slaves (158, 176). Thus, for pro-slavery Southern theologians, slavery did not contradict the Golden Rule of Christ.

Considering their approach to Scripture, it is not surprising that pro-slavery theologians considered abolitionism to be a movement influenced by “the benumbing influences” of culture and human philosophy, which they considered “likely to pervert judgment,” rather than on Scripture (Thornwell 1873:544). Ultimately, the abolitionist cause came to be equated with unfaithfulness to the Bible (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:177). As Hodge asserted, “We see no way of escape from the conclusion that
the conduct of the modern abolitionists, being directly opposed to that of the authors of our religion, must be wrong and ought to be modified or abandoned" (1860:849).

The biblical foundation for the pro-slavery position was elucidated in the quintessential document, “A Southern Address to Christendom,” issued the same year the Civil War began (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206–210) with James Thornwell writing the first draft. “Nowhere in southern literature may one find the proslavery argument developed with greater force or lucidity” (206). While desirable, it is impossible to present the document here in its entirety and the reader is referred to the original source in the Works Cited section; however, it is important to present some of what it is found therein. The statement begins with a strong affirmation about its reliance on the Bible alone and follows with these words:

The antagonism of Northern and Southern sentiment on the subject of slavery lies at the root of all the difficulties which have resulted in the dismemberment of the Federal Union, and involved us in the horrors of an unnatural war. . . . And here we may venture to lay before the Christian world our views as a Church, upon the subject of slavery. We beg a candid hearing.

We have said enough to vindicate the position of the Southern Church. We have assumed no new attitude. We stand exactly where the Church of God has always stood – from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, from Christ to the Reformers, and from the Reformers to ourselves. We stand upon the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief cornerstone. Shall we be excluded from the fellowship of our brethren in other lands, because we dare not depart from the charter of our faith? Shall we be branded with the stigma of reproach, because we cannot consent to corrupt the Word of God to suit the intuitions of an infidel philosophy? Shall our names be cast out as evil, and the finger of scorn pointed at us, because we utterly refuse to break our communion with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses, David and Isaiah, with Apostles, Prophets and Martyrs, with all the noble army of confessors who have gone to glory from slave-holding countries and from a slave-holding Church, without ever having dreamed that they were living in mortal sin, by conniving at slavery in the midst of them? If so, we shall take consolation in the cheering consciousness that the Master has accepted us. We may be denounced, despised and cast out of the Synagogues of our brethren.

But while they are wrangling about the distinctions of men according to the flesh, we shall go forward in our Divine work, and confidently anticipate that, in the great day, as the consequence of our humble labors, we shall meet millions of glorified spirits, who have come up from the bondage of earth to a nobler freedom that human
philosophy ever dreamed of. Others, if they please may spend their time in declaiming on the tyranny of earthly master; it will be our aim to resist the real tyrants which oppress the soul – Sin and Satan. These are the foes against whom we shall find it employment enough to wage a successful war. And to this holy war it is the purpose of our Church to devote itself with redoubled energy. We feel that the souls of our slaves are a solemn trust, and we shall strive to present them faultless and complete before the presence of God. (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206–210)

It was feelings such as these that eventually led the Southern church to support the Civil War. God, they were convinced, was on their side. As Charles Hodge exclaimed, “If the present course of the abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the apostles were wrong” (1860:849).

**Hermeneutical Foundations of the Anti-Slavery Position**

Abolitionism was a complex and multifaceted movement involving people of all walks of life (Newman 2002). There were many abolitionists who could hardly be considered Christians and whose behavior was questionable to Christian anti-slavery activists, even though they shared the same cause (Carden 2014:151). It cannot be denied, however, that, like the pro-slavery theologians, Christian theologians who fought against slavery found their inspiration in the Bible. The modern abolitionist movement emerged among English Quakers and other evangelical groups (Midgley 1992:15), and the first modern anti-slavery activists were unquestionably committed, Bible-believing Christians. The star of the British anti-slavery movement, William Wilberforce, was indubitably a born-again Christian (1897:178). His friend and mentor, John Newton, was a former slave ship captain who experienced conversion through the reading of Scripture, subsequently abandoning the slave trade and becoming a Christian minister (Phipps 2001).

In the United States, anti-slavery sentiments received a significant boost during the Second Great Awakening, an evangelical movement that swept throughout North America from the 1790s through to the early 1840s. While directed primarily towards spiritual awakening, this movement also focused on social and personal reform; it “aimed at perfecting both the social order and the individual so that the millennium could begin” (Knight 2000:36, 37; see also Bicknell 2015:19). Unlike the First Great Awakening (~1720–1750s), which was led predominantly by Calvinist thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, both of whom owned slaves (Kidd 2014:111), most of the leaders of the Second Great Awakening leaned toward Arminianism. In contrast to the Calvinist
emphasis on the sovereignty of God and predestination, Arminianism focused on love as the primary attribute of God, as well as human free will, and thus encouraged social transformation as an outgrowth of the Gospel message. This theological persuasion steered many toward the anti-slavery position (Hankins 2004:85–87; see also Noll 2016:208, 231).

Like the pro-slavery theologians, the anti-slavery movement, which grew out of the Second Great Awakening, also emphasized the centrality of Scriptures. “Now the Bible is my ultimate appeal in all matters of faith and practice,” wrote Angelina Grimké in her 1836 Appeal to the Christian Women of the South, “and to this test I am anxious to bring the subject at issue between us” (1836, emphasis in text). Similarly, the authors of the Annual Report of the prominent Sheffield Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society insisted: “The Bible, and the Bible alone is the touch stone to which we would bring slavery.” On the basis of their study of the Bible alone, they concluded: “Away with such things” (Sheffield Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, Annual Report 1827:11; quoted by Twells in Clapp and Jeffrey 2011:75).

While many Christian anti-slavery activists adopted the starting point of “the Bible and the Bible alone,” their approach to the Bible was starkly different to that of the pro-slavery theologians. As evidenced above, pro-slavery theologians tended to concentrate on individual statements in Scripture, constructing a theology of societal order that was “applicable at all times to all men” (Stirling 1857:120). In contrast, anti-slavery Christians tended to focus on the grand themes of Scripture, such as the love of God, his moral law, creation in the image of God, freedom, equality, redemption and restoration. It was these grand Scriptural themes—or “abstract principles” (Hodge 1857:480) so reviled by pro-slavery theologians—that provided a hermeneutical lens for interpreting difficult passages of Scripture. Seen through this lens, slavery was an utterly repulsive instrument of satanic oppression. This hermeneutical lens was clearly evident in the 1818 report adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, which condemned slavery in the most blistering terms:

We consider enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. . . . Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system—it exhibits rational, accountable, and immortal beings, in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others, whether they shall receive religious instruction; whether they shall know and worship the true God; whether they shall enjoy the ordinances of the Gospel; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the
endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbours [sic] and friends; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity, or regard the dictates of justice and humanity. Such are some of the consequences of slavery—consequences not imaginary—but which connect themselves with its very existence. (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:179, 180)

Thus, while adopting a “Bible and Bible alone” stance, anti-slavery Christian activists believed that universal, Bible-based “principles of humanity and religion” (180) applied to all human interactions; and that the difficult biblical passages regarding slavery should be interpreted through the lens of these universal principles. So what were some of the anti-slavery arguments used by Christian abolitionists?

**The Biblical Case against Slavery**

As outlined above, anti-slavery biblical arguments began with the concept of God as love. Anti-slavery theologians proclaimed that “God had no attribute in favor of slavery,” and that a God of love and grace “can not love slavery” (Elliot 1857:121). As George Thompson wrote, “The religion of Christ is a religion of love,” and thus “it never has, it never can, sanction for a moment, so foul, so inhuman, so impious, and murderous a system as that of . . . SLAVERY” (1836:18, emphasis in text). Furthermore, anti-slavery theologians emphasized the biblical teaching that all humans were created in the image of God, making “a compelling case that nothing [could] annul the birth-right charter, which God had bequeathed to every being upon which he had stamped his own image” (Kilner 2015:11). As Frederick Douglass wrote: “[Slavery] is an attempt to undo what God has done, to blot out the broad distinction instituted by the Allwise between men and things, and to change the image and superscription of the everliving God into a speechless piece of merchandise. Such a decision cannot stand. God will be true though every man be a liar” (in Kilner 2015:11, 12). Anti-slavery theologians argued that the creation of all humanity in the image of God negated racism, inequality and oppression of any kind (Grimké 1836:3); and that “all those created in God’s image [should] be included in ‘We the people’” (Wills 2009:13). Moreover, they asserted that while Adam and Eve received dominion over all creation, they were not given dominion over other human beings. “Man then, I assert never was put under the feet of man, by that first charter of human rights which was given by God . . . therefore this doctrine of equality is based on the Bible” (Grimké 1836:3).

Having established a foundation for Christian abolitionism in the biblical account of Creation, anti-slavery Christian activists moved to dismantle
the pro-slavery position point by point. Did Noah’s curse established slavery? In his meticulously researched and written masterpiece, *The Bible and Slavery* (1837), prominent Christian pastor and abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld asserted that, first, the curse was a prediction rather than a normative declaration; second, the prophecy was fulfilled in Israel’s subjection of the Canaanites some 900 years later, implying that the prophecy spoke to national rather than individual servitude; third, it was service, rather than slavery, that was prophesied; and that, finally, it could not be indubitably established that all Africans descended from Ham (1864:95–98). Accordingly, Weld maintained that this particular prophecy was not applicable to all men at all times. Indeed, Abraham owned slaves; however, their situation was nothing like that of the Southern slaves. For example, note that Abraham “though so great a man, [went] to the herd himself and fetch[ed] a calf from thence and serv[ed] it up with this own hands, for the entertainment of his guests.” No aspect of biblical servitude, according to Christian abolitionists, resembled slavery practiced in the American South (Grimké 1836:4). Furthermore, while the law of Moses permitted slavery, it was subject to stringent regulations, and in no way established an antecedent for American slavery (Weld 1864:104–114).

The fact that Jesus and the apostles did not actively oppose the institution of slavery did not mean that they condoned it. Nineteenth-century writer Ellen G. White closed the door on this argument when she wrote:

> It was not the apostle’s work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system. (1911:459, 460)

In this passage, White asserted three things: first, she suggested that it was not the role of the apostles, which would include their Master, to oppose the cultural conventions of the times in which they lived, as doing so would undermine the preaching of the gospel; second, she emphasized the overarching “principles,” so reviled by pro-slavery theologians, which undermined human inequality and other unjust social practices; and third, White implied that the preaching of the gospel would inevitably result in social change. This was also pointed out by anti-slavery Christian writer W. E. Channing, who stated:

> Slavery, in the ages of the Apostle, had so penetrated society, was so intimately interwoven with it . . . that a religion, preaching freedom to the slave, would have shaken the social fabric to its foundation, and would have armed against itself the whole power of State. Paul
did not then assail the institution. He satisfied himself with spreading principles, which, however slowly, could not but work its destruction. (1870:599, emphasis mine)

This brings us to the Magna Carta of the abolitionists movement, Paul’s statement in Gal 3:28: “There is neither, Jew not Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Pro-slavery advocates believed that this passage referred only to the commonality of faith and the equal offer of salvation to all, regardless of their social standing (Holifield 2003:497). They believed that this social standing was established by God and thus could not be changed; and that Paul’s inclusion of “slave” and “free” in the same sentence indicated that Paul’s intent was not to abolish the master-slave relationship (Priest 1852:533, 534). After all, this same Paul wrote: “Slaves, obey your masters.” Would not using Gal 3:28 as an anti-slavery passage force Paul to contradict himself? (Whitford 2009:30). Thus, pro-slavery theologians did not interpret this passage in terms of social justice; rather, they suggested that a Christian slave should not be discouraged by his bondage, “for by faith in Christ he is a freeman in the highest and best sense of the term, a brother and fellow-heir, with his believing master, of eternal glory in heaven. . . . All earthly distinctions and blessings vanish into utter insignificance when compared with the eternal realities of the kingdom of God” (Jones 1861:25; Killen 1859:124, 125). Accordingly, they asserted that Paul spoke only of equal access to salvation for all believers, leaving the divinely instituted distinction between “the bond and the free” intact (Armstrong 1857:65–70; Junkin 1843:50).

Christian abolitionists could not have read Gal 3:28 more differently. While they agreed that Paul spoke of the commonality of faith and equal availability of salvation for both “slave and free,” and while they agreed that the passage did not explicitly abolish the institution of slavery, they were convinced that in proclaiming “neither bond nor free,” Paul planted the seed for future abolitionism. How could a Christian, who had received salvation by the blood of Jesus, continue keeping others in slavery? Rather, they asserted that, if truly embraced, Paul’s doctrine “would lead to universal emancipation. . . . If all masters and all slaves became Christians, slavery would at once cease” and no oppression of human by another human would continue (Barnes 1844:354). Thus, abolitionists viewed this passage not only as a proclamation of spiritual equality but also the seeds of social and racial equality. With reference to Gal 3:28 and similar passages, Goldwin Smith wrote:

[They] do not inculcate social or political apathy; they do not pass, upon the Christian world a sentence of social or political despair. The
faculties for social improvement, and the desire to redress inequality and injustice, which God had given us, the Son of God did not take away. On the contrary, He and His Apostles increased those faculties and that desire a thousand-fold by the principles of mutual affection and duty which they instilled into the heart of man, and by the new force of self-devotion which they added to his moral powers. (1863:84, 85)

Many black American slaves embraced this understanding of the Gospel of Christ, and the liberating hermeneutic of the “abstract principles” so reviled by pro-slavery theologians enthralled them. “The equality of all people before God” or “gospel equality” became the “hermeneutical key to understand[ing] both scripture and their social situation” (Williams 2004:103). Unsurprisingly, many slave owners endeavored to limit the religious education of their slaves, lest they imbibe such “abstract principles” and buy into the “liberating hermeneutic” of the Gospel of Christ (Horton and Horton 1997:19, 20). Opposing such educational practices, Charles Elliott wrote:

If the relation of the master and slave is one recognized in the Bible, then the Bible is the right book to put into the hands of the slaves; and the slave should immediately be taught to read, that he may read the Bible, which, they say, sanctions slavery. If the Bible never speaks of slavery as sinful, then the best thing that could be done to support slavery would be to teach all the slaves to read it, that slavery may have the sanction of the Bible, as some pretend to affirm that it has. (1850:127, emphasis in text)

In addition to Gal 3:28, anti-slavery Christian activists explored a plethora of biblical passages that they saw as addressing the problem of slavery. They asserted that Moses’ proclamations in Exod 21:16 and Deut 23:15–16 should “alone be sufficient to put an end to slavery.” They declared that Jesus’ mission of “preach[ing] good news to the poor” and “proclaim[ing] freedom for the prisoners” (Luke 4:18) was incompatible with the institution of slavery (Address to Christians 1831:10, 11). To the argument that Onesimus was returned to his owner they countered that “christianity [sic], in this, as in many other cases, has provided, without express precepts, a sure and inoffensive corrective of all oppressive institutions, by the gradual influence of its liberal and benignant maxims; which did, in point of fact, dissolve the bonds of slavery in most parts of the Christian world” (12). They saw the principle of human equality of all humans in Paul’s declaration that “From one man he made every nation of men” (Acts 17:26). This, they argued, was the foundation of the American Declaration of Independence (Noll 2006:41).
Having surveyed all the scriptural evidence, the authors of the *Address to Christians of All Denominations on the Inconsistency of Admitting Slaver-Holders to Communion and Church Membership* (1831) concluded that “the modern system of negro slavery finds no support in the scriptures, either of the Old or New Testament, and is directly at variance with the spirit and design of the gospel of Christ.” “Slavery,” they concluded, “will soon cease to be a curse upon our country, and a disgrace to our nation. Then will the blessing of him that was ready to perish, come upon us, and the soul of the emancipated slave will be made to sing for joy” (12, 19).

**Analysis**

Even a cursory perusal of Christian history shows that the Bible played a pivotal role in shaping its narrative. On the one hand, Christians consider this collection of ancient documents an inspired fount of knowledge about God, human origin, and destiny, as well as God’s offer of salvation in Christ Jesus. This knowledge has been an enduring source of Christian comfort and hope, as well as a source of the moral code of countless societies. At the same time, however, the Christian Scriptures have been a source of intense disagreement. There has never been a period when Christian thinkers, scholars, and believers did not argue about the meaning of individual passages and words. At times, these disagreements have ended peacefully, with adherents of various interpretations willing to “agree to disagree” and live side by side in peace. At other times, these disagreements have led to war. From the early post-apostolic era, millions of human beings have lost their lives as a result of disagreeing scriptural interpretations.

Such disagreements were also a major factor during the American Civil War, in which, according to some estimates, over one million people lost their lives. Conflicts of such magnitude are usually caused by a variety of historical, geo-political, and social circumstances, which are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the reader is referred to the many volumes that explain the Civil War and its causes. The main reason for this paper is to bring attention to the fact that theologians and Christian activists on both sides of that conflict claimed to use the Bible alone to buttress their position on slavery. Both considered the Bible to be God’s revelation and thus the only authoritative document for Christian doctrine and practice; both claimed adherence to its teachings and advocated reading it in a “plain” manner; and yet both arrived at dramatically different conclusions. How could this be?

The most probable answer to this question lies in the two related but divergent approaches to hermeneutics adopted by these two groups. At
the risk of oversimplification, but for the sake of clarity, I would like to label these two approaches as “static” and “dynamic” hermeneutics. A “static” hermeneutic stops at the level of the text, thus embracing a literalistic approach to controversial biblical passages. Such a reading of the text is then considered to transcend all cultural barriers, and its conclusions to be applicable “at all times to all people” (Stirling 1857:120). Before continuing, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms “literal” and “literalistic.” Jiři Moskala offers this helpful explanation: “‘Literal’ means that one reads the biblical text in its context with its intended message meanwhile ‘literalistic’ reading means that the biblical text is taken in a very narrow dogmatic way without applying its contextual and larger theological considerations” (2013).

Similarly to a “static” hermeneutic, a “dynamic” hermeneutic affirms that the text can be read in a “plain” way but it also gives careful attention to the immediate and wider context of the passage. Furthermore, it endeavors to frame controversial passages within broader biblical “principles.” Accordingly, overarching themes, such as “God is Love,” “back to Creation narrative,” “love your neighbor as yourself,” “do unto others,” “be holy because I am holy,” etc., become part of the hermeneutical lens through which difficult scriptural passages are interpreted. This is exactly what happened in the case of the Christian anti-slavery movement.

The Scripture itself provides support for this kind of interpretative procedure. Ron du Preez in reviewing this paper prior to publication, pointing out a three-pronged interpretive approach (observation, interpretation, and application) as well as supporting passages. In Neh 8:8 the Levites read from the Book of the Law of God to the people and then interpreted it, or gave it “the meaning, so that the people understood what was being read.” Once the people “understood” the Word of God, they were encouraged to put it into practice. The same three-step interpretative process is evident in Luke 10:25-37, where an expert in the law engaged Jesus in conversation. First, Jesus asked, “What is written in the law?” — a question that, on its own, would seem to support a literalistic approach; however, Jesus immediately moved on to ask, “How do you read it?” — a process that required interpretation in view of the context. Only in light of this second step, in which the meaning of the passage was understood, did Christ urge the expert to put his teaching into practice (v. 37). Finally, in Luke 24:13-35, Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Once again, the discussion began with a literalistic interpretation of the prophetic words and a cherished opinion. Jesus then admonished the disciples: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! . . . And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures
concerning himself” (v. 27, emphasis mine). Once the disciples’ eyes were opened through Christ’s contextual interpretation, they immediately put into practice what they heard. These passages point to a holistic way of interpreting difficult scriptural passages. First, one begins with the text; then “contextual and larger theological considerations” (Moskala 2013:10) such as overarching biblical themes are taken into account, giving the passage “meaning” (Neh 8:8); and finally, the message is applied. It is evident that pro-slavery theologians bypassed the second step, moving directly from a literalistic reading to application.

In contrast, while affirming that the text can be read in a “plain” or “literal” way, a “dynamic” hermeneutic tends to emphasize a “principled” reading of controversial biblical texts. Accordingly, those who apply a “dynamic” hermeneutic to the biblical text seek for overarching themes, such as “God is Love,” “new Creation narrative,” “love your neighbor as yourself,” “do unto others,” “be holy because I am holy,” etc., and they use these themes as a hermeneutic lens to interpret difficult scriptural passages, such as those dealing with slavery.

Can a “dynamic” or “principled” interpretation lead to a more subjective way of interpreting Scripture? This cannot be denied. However, the foundation for such an approach to scriptural interpretation lies in the fact that, albeit inferior, our understanding of God’s attributes is analogous to the way God understands them. Take, for example, the concept of “love.” If we make a sharp, qualitative distinction between God’s love and human love, then we make God incomprehensible, and statements such as “God is love” or “God is just” are meaningless. If such concepts are divorced from human experience, then knowledge of God becomes humanly impossible. The reason why God revealed himself in the Scriptures was to help humanity comprehend what his love and his justice are like. Furthermore, this revelation was given so that our damaged understanding of the moral principles of God’s government could be corrected. It is such an approach to scriptural interpretation that provided the foundational framework for those Christians who opposed slavery. To suggest that God, who revealed himself in the Scriptures through the life and death of Jesus Christ, condoned the atrocity of American slavery was, for them, tantamount to blasphemy. It was this cognitive dissonance that pro-slavery theologians were willing to live with, whereas besmirching the character of God was a risk that abolitionist Christians were not willing to take.

As I have reflected on this subject, a question kept returning to my mind: “What makes readers of the Bible choose one hermeneutical approach over another?” Before attempting to answer this question, I need to make an observation. In my 26 years of Christian ministry, as a local church pastor, missionary, and academic, I am yet to meet a believer who uses only one hermeneutical approach consistently. This is also my own
experience. Shifting back and forth between hermeneutics is not necessarily undesirable. A hermeneutically “static” approach to some scriptural passages may be appropriate, whereas a “dynamic” approach may add a new dimension to our understanding of certain texts. After all, God created us to use both reason and experience when interacting with external data. Furthermore, none of us have complete knowledge of all things and we continue to grow in our understanding. Thus, consciously choosing a consistent hermeneutical approach might not be possible or desirable. Otherwise, how could anyone ever experience a phenomenon of “changing of one’s mind”? But I have also observed that much of our intra-denominational conflict is caused by diverse hermeneutical approaches to the same scriptural passage. Thus, we return to the question posed above: What is it that makes us choose a particular hermeneutical approach over another when approaching a difficult passage of the Bible?

The answer that makes most sense to me is that it is our worldview, based on a variety of presuppositions, which tends to make one choose a particular hermeneutical approach. However we might deny it, it is incontrovertible that we bring ourselves into the reading of the text. Once again, this is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, having a worldview is necessary if we want to approach Scripture in a meaningful way. For example, a person who believes that the Bible is the Word of God will approach the text in a different way than one who espouses atheism. We also bring ourselves into the reading of the text when we think of God’s attributes, such as his love. When I encounter the word “love” in the New Testament, I subconsciously assume that what the author had in mind matches my own concept of love. This, however, may not necessarily be true. After all, my twenty-first century understanding of the concept of “love” may be different from the original author’s concept of “love.” And not only is the English word “love” used to translate several different Greek words, but different cultures, families, and religious traditions, such as Calvinism and Arminianism, can understand the concept of “love” in diverse ways. The same applies to other attributes of God, such as his “justice,” “goodness,” “sovereignty,” etc. The bottom line is that we are not usually conscious of the fact that we bring our worldview, or cultural presuppositions with us when we approach the text of the Bible. I believe that this is the key to understanding what happened in American society prior to the Civil War.

While researching material for this paper, I was astounded to find so many biblical passages relating to slavery. If considered in their entirety, and in isolation from the “abstract principles” of the Bible, these passages establish a powerful pro-slavery argument. While I knew that these passages existed, I had always subconsciously applied a “dynamic” hermeneutic to them, deeming them irrelevant to my life and the
society I was a part of. This was because the worldview I grew up with provided the subconscious presupposition that slavery was an abhorrent and inhumane practice. Interestingly, this presupposition did not come from the church, but rather, from public education in communist Poland where I grew up. The theme of slavery was so distant and so irrelevant to my Christian life that I do not ever remember discussing it with fellow believers. It was my atheist teachers who instilled in me repugnance for slavery. Later, my maturing Christian worldview aligned with what I had been taught by my cultural environment. Similarly, in modern America people are taught from childhood, at home, school, and church, through “the newspapers, the novel, and the magazine” (Hopkins 1864:5, 17), that any form of slavery is evil. It is not surprising, therefore, that when we read the biblical passages on slavery, we subconsciously choose a “dynamic” or “principled” hermeneutic.

Not so with the youth of the antebellum South, who grew up accustomed to slavery. Surrounded by slave nannies, slave cooks, slave housekeepers, and slave plantation workers, children were taught that slavery was an inherent part of the economy, that their wellbeing depended on slave labor, and that God had ordained it this way. They also grew up believing that slavery benefited their slaves; that because slaves were a different category of human beings, a “permanently inferior and brutish separate human species” (Martin 1984:231), they needed bondage to bring out the best in them (Cumming 2015:158). Thomas Jefferson, one of America’s Founding Fathers, believed that “blacks ability to reason was much inferior to the whites, while in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous and inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind” (Finkelman 2014:197). For Jefferson, “the equality of mankind” could only be achieved “by excluding blacks” (197). As a result, many Southern Christians viewed Abraham Lincoln as an uncontrollable, hypocritical, anti-Christian villain who started an “unnatural war” that would destroy the divinely established social order, rather than as a hero (Cumming 2015:14, 15, 158, 159, 174–176). They also viewed Uncle Tom’s Cabin as a “powerful propaganda weapon for the North,” rather than as a literary masterpiece (175) and abolitionism as an ideology that struck at the heart of their Christian worldview. This was what the children of the antebellum South were taught at home, school, and church, through “the newspapers, the novel, and the magazine.” This shaped their adult worldview, their “normal,” the lens through which they read their Bibles.

**Conclusion**

In AD 495 the Roman writer Plautus uttered the famous words *Homo homini lupus*, that is, “Man is wolf to man.” Since that time, this phrase...
has been used to describe the various atrocities committed by humans against other humans. Throughout Christian history, many such atrocities were committed in the name of Scripture. The modern slave trade, which took millions of human beings from their African homeland to slavery in the Americas and Europe, was one such atrocity; the horrific treatment of slaves by their Southern masters was another. Even those who might be considered “good” masters believed slavery to be divinely sanctioned. While they agreed that slaves should not be mistreated, they believed that these “isolated” incidents could be dealt with locally and did not warrant a war.

It is important to keep in mind that, in terms of human cruelty, American slavery was on a par with other atrocities such as the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, or the genocide in Rwanda. Not one of the modern, intra-church disagreements even comes close to the inhumanity of those conflicts. In the case of Southern slavery, however, most slave owners were Christians who justified their practices by what they believed were the “plain” teachings of the Bible. Thus, while underestimating the inhumanity of Southern slavery and embracing the \textit{a-priori} position that modern slavery is incompatible with the grand biblical principle of God’s love, it is important for us to draw some lessons for today. Otherwise, we could be in danger of fulfilling George Santayana’s aphorism: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

So what can be learned from this investigation? Most importantly, it should be recognized that everyone approaches Scripture with a variety of presuppositions, which are shaped by a person’s prenatal and childhood experiences, their personalities, their interactions with families and friends, their education and by the media. As a result, every person approaches Scripture with a different set of intellectual tools. I am convinced that there are no two individuals who are perfectly hermeneutically aligned. This is what I consider “hermeneutical misalignment,” a concept that there are too many variables in our individual development for Christians to all arrive at identical understandings of controversial biblical passages. Even Ellen White suggested that “all cannot see in the same line of vision” (1979:14). While a group of believers should agree on the grand themes of the Bible and arrive at a set of fundamental teachings of Scriptures based on these themes, and while it is reasonable to expect that all who belong to a group or denomination agree with its fundamental beliefs, it is both futile and harmful to the community to expect that everyone agree on the interpretation of all Scriptural passages. “We cannot then take a position,” wrote Ellen White, “that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of the Scripture in the very same shade of light” (1993:150).³

Within the unifying boundaries of agreement on fundamental Christian doctrines, hermeneutical misalignment is a good and desired phenomenon.
It is, after all, a result of God’s design for human individuality. Thus, Christians functioning in an environment characterized by the grand themes of God’s love for humanity and human love for God and for one another (John 3:16; Matt 22:37–39) should celebrate hermeneutical misalignment. Within such an environment, believers can be encouraged to recognize the reality of its existence and to explore its benefits, including mutual understanding, possible adjustment of one’s presuppositions, constructive conflict, theological development, and the joy of belonging to a community of diverse people who believe in the concept of “present truth.”

While necessary and beneficial, hermeneutical misalignment can also produce unhealthy conflict. This occurs when the overarching principles of God’s love towards humanity and human love towards one another are neglected within the community. Unhealthy conflict also occurs when individual believers or small group of believers within a denomination, become locked up within the prison of their own worldview, at times even denying that they approach Scripture from within a particular worldview. Under such circumstances, dogmatism trumps other values; the aphorism “my way or the highway” becomes a reality, personal and communal growth is stifled, theological development suffers, and the concept of diversity becomes anathema. Ultimately, such communities tear themselves apart, all for the sake of an ideology. A lonely driver with a sticker on his hatch door proclaiming “The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!” becomes just that—a lonely driver on the highway of his or her own presuppositions.

Second, considering the reasons outlined above, it behooves us to prayerfully acknowledge the fact that none of us approaches the biblical text with a blank slate. We must each ask for the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize, understand, and, if necessary, give us strength to align our presuppositions according to God’s will (White 1913:463). Recognizing that our worldview, as well as the worldview of those who oppose our positions, influences the reading of the Scripture may help with healing wounds and moving forward.

Third, we must always be aware that Eisegesis is an ever-present danger for all students of the Bible. Like the Christians of the antebellum South, all who study the Scriptures face the temptation to “bring certain Scriptures together, and interpret passages of the Bible, so as to give coloring to [our] views.” We must thus be careful not to engage in “wresting the Scriptures to make them appear to say that which they do not say” (White 1946:153).

And finally, we must humbly acknowledge that God might choose culture to provide a wake-up call for Christians. It is not always a one-way street. Christians are continually admonished not to “conform to
the patterns of this world” (Rom 12:2) and to reject the practices that are clearly contrary to the Word of God. At the same time, however, we must be aware that God can use culture to nudge Christians to carefully re-examine their “cherished opinions” (White 1900:91) in the light of Scripture. This is what happened during the Second Great Awakening. The Northern culture of anti-slavery, whether influenced by the Bible or secular humanism, ultimately prevailed in the South and throughout the Western world. A testimony to this fact is that, today, atheists and Christians alike agree that slavery was an inhumane institution and a stain upon the fabric of the American nation.

Notes

1Charles B. Hodge was a staunchly Calvinist scholar who is widely regarded today as one of the fathers of modern American fundamentalism. He is known as a systematician of Princeton theology, who defended the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures (Olson 1999:558, 559; Hodge 1940:155–171). At this point it must be clarified that verbal inspiration and inerrancy does not necessarily correlate with support for slavery. During Hodge’s own time, and later, many conservative theologians supported verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures but strongly objected to slavery.

2John Peckham deals with this phenomenon in depth in his masterful study of God’s love. The Love of God (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

3For an excellent exposition of Ellen G. White’s views on Scriptural interpretation, as well as the issues of unity and diversity, see Jerry Moon’s article “Unity in Diversity” in The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia, ed. by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 1241–1244.

4Ellen White wrote: “One man may be conversant with the Scriptures, and some particular portion of the Scripture is especially appreciated by him because he has seen it in a certain striking light; another sees another portion as very important; and thus one and another presents the very points to the people that appear of highest value. This is all in the order of God” (White 1993:149–150, emphasis supplied).

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Acts 3 and 4 tell a story of Peter and John healing a man who had been crippled from birth. The Sanhedrin threatened them and forbade them to talk about Jesus, “but they let them go because they didn’t know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God” (4:21, 22 NLT).

A few years later while Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra they met another man, who also had been crippled from birth (Acts 14:8). When the power of Jesus healed him the people of Lystra believed that the gods Zeus and Hermes had come to visit them. They quickly gathered wreaths of flowers and prepared to offer a bull as a sacrifice to the men.

These two very similar situations are interpreted in very different ways. It is obvious there was a huge difference between the background of the Jewish people in Jerusalem and the people in Lystra. One group praised God for the healing, the other group believed that two gods of mythology had come to earth and healed the man.

Most people would agree that a group’s cultural background and experiences shape their view of reality. We expect different interpretations between a Jewish and pagan worldview. However, what is troubling is that the events of the past five years have shown that Seventh-day Adventists, who supposedly share foundational principles of hermeneutics, could come to such different conclusions concerning the role of women in ministry.

I believe that methodology and assumptions that guide the hermeneutical process are vitally important. Richard Davidson has championed the grammatico-historical approach to hermeneutics in contrast to the historical-critical method (2003:9-13). Jiří Moskala in his article “Toward Consistent Adventist Hermeneutics,” lists important principles like seeking to understand the historical background of the text by asking who, when, where, to whom, why, and what? He stresses the importance of
word study, grammar, syntax, looking at the statistical use of words and phrases, understanding different literary features, and many other important methodological principles (2015:4-9). I assume most Adventists agree with this method. So the question: If Adventists agree with the grammatico-historical method and the principles that Moskala outlines in his article, why, on important issues like the role of women in ministry, is there so much disagreement?

Social Location

I believe that the answer lies in understanding the impact that social location has on each individual. “Sociologists argue that the social location of an individual profoundly influences who they are and who they become, [their] interactions with others, self-perception, opportunities and outcomes” (Social Location 2012). Social location includes such things as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, language, beliefs, behaviors, customs, and worldview (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey n.d.:52).

Social location also forms the lenses through which people read and interpret Scripture. David Rhoads wrote an interesting essay in which he illustrates the many ways social location impacts a person’s hermeneutics. Many who come from Western societies find it difficult to understand the power and shaping influence of group-conscious societies. Westerners often have a hard time understanding how people from many other cultures receive

their personal identity primarily in terms of the social groups of which they are a part—nation, ethnic group, race, family, village, class, gender, and so on. . . .

. . . People come to the text with certain assumptions and experiences that are to a great extent based on the groups with which they identify and into which they were enculturated. We usually share certain presuppositions—ways of thinking, ways of relating, values and beliefs and customs—that are determined (or at least shaped) by the groups in which we find ourselves in a culture, often without our awareness of it. Hence, when students read the biblical text, they come with a whole complex of influences out of their social location. (Rhoads 2008: para. 2, 3)

These influences create the lenses through which every person reads and interprets the Bible. No one comes to the hermeneutical task with no pre-conceived assumptions, life experiences, or cultural biases. Deep commitment to the leading of the Holy Spirit can temper and reduce the impact of social location, but many do not even realize that they have been impacted by it.
T. C. Moore suggests that every person has lenses through which they read and interpret Scripture. These lenses are shaped and formed by at least three aspects of social location, such as (1) one’s history, culture, and physical (bodily) existence, (2) one’s transmitted and developed set of biases and assumptions, and (3) one’s position of power and privilege in relation to others in society (2015:7). In the next section these three types of factors and possible ways they may shape our reading of Scripture are discussed.

History, Culture, and Bodily Existence

Every person has a history, has grown up within a particular culture, and has lived various experiences that shape their thinking and affect their way of life. These are part of a person’s social location (Moore 2015:7). Unfortunately people often have little realization of how their history, past events, and experiences affect how they read and interpret Scripture.

In 2004 Mark Allen Powell wrote a chapter entitled, “The Forgotten Famine” that illustrated how peoples’ social location affect their reading of Scripture. Powell asked 12 students in his seminary class to read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, close their Bibles, and then retell the story as accurately as possible to another student. Not one of the 12 mentioned anything at all about the famine that was the catalyst that caused the son to think of home and his father. Powell was fascinated by this omission, so he had 100 students read the passage, close their Bibles, and then tell the story to a partner. In this experiment, only 6 out of 100 mentioned the famine. The “famine forgetters” had only one thing in common—they were all from the United States, even though they came from different ethnic backgrounds, different socio-economic levels, and were religiously diverse.

Later, Powell had the opportunity to repeat the experiment, but this time in St. Petersburg, Russia, where during the Nazi siege of the city, 670,000 people died of starvation during the three-year famine that was imposed on the city. In that experiment, 42 out of the 50, or 84%, who read the story in Luke mentioned the famine as significant to the story. The wartime famine was still fresh in their memory. Most people in St. Petersburg had lost family or friends in that famine, so when they read Luke 15, they quickly picked up on what they had experienced as part of their social location.
Personal experience had a powerful effect on how Americans and Russians read the story of the Prodigal Son. The Americans, who had never experienced a famine, picked up on other issues. They emphasized the squandering of wealth on wild living and the loss of material things (Luke 15:13), while Russians, who still had recent memories of a horrible famine, saw famine as significant to the story. Another interesting result of this experiment was that 100% of the Americans emphasized the squandering of wealth, whereas only 34% of the Russians picked up on that aspect of the story (Powell 2007:17).

Powell then took his research one step further to see if scholarly commentaries also reflected a similar impact of personal experience. He investigated what 55 scholars had to say about the story of the Prodigal Son. The findings were significant—37 of the 55 scholars surveyed in their commentary made no mention of the famine having an impact on the meaning and significance in the story. Among the remaining 18, most seemed to just regard the narrative role of the famine as a minor event that intensified an already dire situation. “Thus, Western commentaries, like American readers, tend to regard the famine as an almost superfluous detail or, more than half the time, as a completely superfluous detail (Powell 2004:273).

Transmitted and Developed Biases and Assumptions

Another set of factors shaped by one’s social location include the transmitted and developed biases and assumptions that also impact how one reads and interprets Scripture. Nationalism, ethnocentrism, dislike of near neighbors, and attitudes of bigotry can also distort one’s hermeneutics. For example, there are still many cultures in our world that have similar views to the ancient Jews in connection with ritual cleanliness with many people groups believing that “when a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening” (Exod 15:19 NIV). In such cultures the very thought that a woman could occupy the pulpit and stand before a congregation of men is incomprehensible. People with those worldview values just cannot accept the fact that a woman, during her period, could be used to speak God’s Word. This would be beyond their wildest view of what is appropriate.

I interviewed a doctoral student from Ghana concerning such views and he helped me understand some of the issues that are involved. Appiah grew up in a polygamist home. Whenever his mother had her period she would never be involved in preparing food for her husband because she would have caused him to be ritually unclean. Being ritually unclean had far-reaching implications since he was the priest of the family and the one.
that needed to maintain ritual purity so he could have a clean channel to the ancestors. It was believed that to break this taboo would result in calamity coming on the family, clan, or community. So in Ghana, especially among the older generation the idea that a woman could assume a pastoral role would be very difficult for many to accept. However, among those who are younger, the taboo may be known, but it is not feared as much, and among the third or youngest generation many are not even aware that there is a problem.

This concept of ritual purity is also alive within the Russian Orthodox Church and is practiced widely by its members. The general attitudes connected with ritual purity may also play a role in how people look at the issue of women’s ordination in lands where the Orthodox Church has a strong influence. Sister Vassa, an Orthodox nun had this to say:

> When I entered a convent of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) in France, I was introduced to the restrictions imposed on a nun when she has her period. Although she was allowed to go to church and pray, she was not to go to communion; she could not kiss the icons or touch the antidoron, she could not help bake prosphoras or handle them, nor could she help clean the church; she could not even light the hmpada or icon-lamp that hung before the icons in her own cell. (Larin 2008:275)

Within the Russian Orthodox Church regulations dealing with ritual impurity vary from parish to parish and depend a lot on the local priest; however, the general practice allows women to attend church during menstruation but forbids them from receiving Holy Communion, kissing icons or crosses, touching prosphora or the antidoron, or drinking holy water. In parishes outside Russia most women are asked to abstain from partaking of the communion when they are ritually impure (Larin 2008:275).

The above examples help us realize that there are many transmitted and even developed biases that elicit strong opinions that have nothing to do with methods of biblical hermeneutics and everything to do with aspects of social location that shape how a person reads and interprets Scripture.

**Positions of Power and Privilege**

Social location also shapes one’s concepts and perceptions of power and privilege and the power dynamics that exist between various social groups. For example, what kind of attitudes and expectations exist concerning male/female roles? What are the power dynamics between the
wealthy and the poor, between the educated and uneducated, between those with power and authority and those in positions of subordination? What type of relations have been created between a dominant culture and a subordinate or minority culture? These aspects of social location also shape the lenses through which people read and interpret Scripture and vote on important issues.

What I suggest next is sensitive, but it needs to be said. The North American Adventist Church has dominated the rest of Adventism more than we from North America will ever realize. We have exported our North Atlantic hymn tunes in the *Adventist Hymnal* as the songs that are to be used for worship. We have expected others to worship like us, dress like us, build churches like us, and imitate North American Adventism to the point where many Adventists in other parts of the world resent the domination and power of the North American Church. Twice, at Indianapolis and San Antonio, some delegates to those General Conference Sessions voted against North American initiatives just because they wanted to show Americans that they could not have their way and do whatever they wanted. Those negative votes were most likely tainted by memories of heavy-handed policies and practices that were perceived as coming from North America. I taught a class in Puerto Rico just after the Indianapolis meetings and several students in the class openly said they voted against the North American initiative just to prove that they could disagree. I heard similar things after the recent 2015 session in San Antonio, Texas.

This type of attitude had nothing to do with biblical principles and everything to do with social location. One of the characteristics of social location is that it “determines the kinds of power and privilege we have access to and can exercise” (Kirk and Okazawa n.d.:59). As Adventism grows and matures throughout the countries of the world a people’s sense of nationalism, resentment towards cultural domination, and cultural imperialism are factors that also come into play as people realize that they now have power to vote against perceived slights and injustices of the past. This aspect of social location may not be directly related to hermeneutics, but it has and does impact how a world church decides issues that should be based on a reading of Scripture rather than on the impact of social location.

**Implications of Social Location on Adventist Hermeneutics**

What are some implications of social location on Adventist hermeneutics? How do the various aspects of social location impact how an Adventist in Lagos or Moscow or Buenos Aires or Tokyo or Stockholm read and interpret the Bible?
First, everyone has presuppositions. All of us look at the world through our cultural and worldview lenses that have been largely shaped by our social location. These presuppositions allow us to see certain things in Scripture and also keep us from seeing other things in it. Another way to say this is that none of us approach the reading of the Word with a mind as a blank slate (Pickup 2015: para. 4).

Diane Castro illustrates this by sharing something that happened to her one day as she was shopping for food at the local supermarket. She joined about a dozen people who were moving towards the checkout counters. “A rather large woman with bulgy eyes and a grim, mean-looking face was pushing her carriage in my direction. Suddenly she crashed right into another carriage, and I thought, ‘What a jerk, trying to force her way into the line.’ But a second later I regretted the thought. In a very kind voice, the woman apologized profusely to the other person. ‘I’m so sorry. I just had an operation on my eyes and I can’t see very well.”

Castro goes on to say, “My assumption that she was mean and was trying to butt in line was dead wrong. The bulgy eyes, the determined look on her face, and collision with another customer had an entirely different explanation” (2011: para. 2, 3).

All of us have our own presuppositions that not only impact how we view our world, but also our understanding of the Bible. It is good to have strong convictions and beliefs, but we also need to be willing to have those convictions and beliefs challenged by others who perhaps read the Bible with a different set of lenses that have also been shaped by their culture, worldview, and life experiences.

A second implication of social location is the profound effect of culture on hermeneutics. I find it interesting and also a bit discouraging that over the past five years during the discussion of the role of women in ministry not even one paper was presented on how culture impacts the reading of Scripture. Musimbi Kanyoro argues in his article that “the culture of the reader in Africa has more influence on the way the biblical text is understood and used in communities than the historical facts about the text.” He goes on to say “that not knowing the nuances of the culture of modern readers of the Bible has more far-reaching repercussions on biblical hermeneutics than is normally acknowledged” (1997:364). The same should probably be said of people from every culture. Perhaps this explains why the decision was made to have the delegates to the General Conference Session vote on the issue of whether or not divisions could decide the issue of women in ministry. The majority of the Adventist biblical scholars who studied this issue were either neutral or in favor of allowing women to be ordained, but the people in the pew in certain cultures were dead set against allowing women to function with full authority in ministry.
A third way that social location impacts our reading of the Word is the realization that an individual’s lived experiences also shape a person’s hermeneutics. Where a person grew up, the era in which the person lived, how the person was raised—all these factors also color the person’s understanding of Scripture (Pickup 2015: para. 3). It was already mentioned how Americans and Russians with their different life experiences had very different perceptions of the Prodigal Son story in Luke 15.

Finally, a person’s religious tradition, which is part of one’s social location, also impacts one’s view of Scripture. Adventist mission history has many examples of people in 2016 hanging on to the way church was done in 1916 when the Three Angels’ Messages were first given to them. This is especially true concerning the order of worship, what is appropriate to wear when preaching, who can be on the rostrum, and what version of Scripture to use. However, religious tradition also impacts how individuals and whole congregations interpret certain passages of Scripture. Many of those texts are used to forbid women from wearing slacks, from braiding their hair, or from speaking in church—all views that were taught by the early missionaries.

What I take away from my understanding of social location is that many factors have shaped and impacted how I read and interpret the Bible. This should give cause for humility and a willingness to admit that my interpretation of the Bible may at times be influenced by my presuppositions, my culture, my life experiences, and my religious traditions.

Conclusions

Most of the negative aspects of social location and how it affects the reading of Scripture can be corrected if the Adventist Church would read the Bible, “not as isolated individuals, but in communities, allowing ourselves to be open to the readings of Scripture by other churches in contexts different from our own” (Pinnock 2000:145). Paul Hiebert also suggests that the church needs to function as an international hermeneutical community:

Just as we can more clearly see sin in the lives of others, so we can see how the cultural and historical settings of Christians in other lands affects their theology [and their hermeneutics]. Conversely, they see the cultural biases of our theology much more clearly than we. Therefore, we need to see the church as an international hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another’s cultural biases. (1985:16)

What would happen if Adventism would openly talk about how social location impacts the reading and interpreting of Scripture? What would
happen if people from various parts of the world talked freely about how culture impacts all of our hermeneutics?

I was at first discouraged about the vote against allowing divisions to decide the issue of women in ministry, but I am optimistic that as Adventists from around the world think, pray, and study together, and yes challenge each other’s presuppositions, that we all will have a better understanding of biblical perspectives on this topic and many other issues.

Works Cited


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The Interplay between Forms of Revelation: Implications for Theological Method

Introduction

The interplay between forms of revelation has been a matter of much discussion in theological discourse for many centuries. While this article is not particularly concerned with the final say on the doctrine of revelation it is concerned with revelation and its relation to theological method. In other words, what is the significance of the various modes or forms that revelation takes in connection with the way theology is approached and done? Revelation is a challenging concept to define without creating some sense of ambiguity. This article will proceed with a short definition of revelation as the various forms that God utilizes to reveal who he is to humanity. Theology in this paper is understood to be the dynamic pursuit of attempting to understand who God is as a relational being and the corresponding faith in God manifested as a result of his revelation.

Presuppositions

This article presupposes that God is triune and that Christ is the Incarnate God who came to earth in the flesh. It also presupposes that Scripture is the inspired Word of God and that God is also revealed through experiences, people, the faith community known as the church, and that this revelation takes place in cultural contexts. The primary concern of this article is not to isolate forms of revelation but rather to work with the forms listed above to understand better how they interplay with each other as revelatory forms and what this means for theological method.

In order to do this Paul’s Damascus road encounter with Christ and
the subsequent events will serve as a paradigmatic narrative to be used as a framework for the discussion. This narrative displays all of the above forms of revelation and can aid in an understanding as to how these forms interplay with each other in cultural contexts.

Limits and Tools

This article is limited in that it does not pretend to be the final word on the topic nor comprehensive in its research outcomes. It is more of a working project meant to foster further study, reflection, and research on the issue of revelation, Christ, and theological method. It is somewhat limited in that it focuses on particular biblical passages, a particular person (Paul), and on a particular context. There is much more biblical material that is relevant to the thesis of this article and that would inform and enhance the thesis to a great extent, but such will be bypassed due to space constraints.

In order to accomplish the task several different disciplines were consulted. Of course systematic theologies played a role, but works that would fall under other theological disciplines, such as historical theology and biblical theology were also consulted. Missiological, anthropological, and sociological literature were also referenced. These are often disciplines that are left out of theological discussions, but have been increasingly recognized as extremely valuable and important voices in theological discussion.

The Interplay of Revelatory Forms in Paul’s Encounter

Acts 9:1-31, 11:25-26, and 12:25-13:3 relate the account in Scripture of Paul’s transformative encounter from Christian persecutor to Christian epitomizer. However, it is not the only place that references this story. Later in his life Paul would frequently make references to this experience, both in his speeches and epistles. Acts 22:2b-21 records Paul’s retelling of the events of his transformation before a crowd of angry Jews in Jerusalem. Again in Acts 26:4-23 Paul tells the story to King Agrippa at the court of Festus. Each of these are relevant for the purposes of this paper and will be consulted. Paul also references this encounter in several different places in his epistles: in 1 Cor 15:9, 10, as well as Gal 1:11-24 in a very explicit manner. There are many more implicit or less direct references in other epistles as well. Beyond these direct references, however, it is important to recognize that “the Damascus Event [is] the hinge around which Paul’s career turned, and there is no way one can seriously engage with Paul apart from this” (Barnett 2013:392). While there were a variety of things that would have influenced Paul’s theology as found in his epistles,
his Damascus road experience is clearly one of the most formative experiences he had.

The various revelatory forms of Paul’s encounter could be debated, but this article will argue that God, at the very least, used the following forms to reveal himself. First, there is the direct encounter on the road in which Jesus is seen both in physical light and in person and Paul also heard an audible voice. Paul is then sent to get a word of encouragement and prophetic guidance from a “disciple” who is also part of the growing community known as The Way. Thus, both the disciple and the larger community serve as conduits of revelation and help Paul interpret his experience through the OT Scriptures, which Paul was already well acquainted with. Paul then goes out to tell others of his experience and becomes an active member of the community by becoming a witness to Christ whom he has experienced and begun to understand. But this is done in a limited way, until many years later, when he is sought out by Barnabas and brought to Antioch, which then leads to his full call to share God with the Gentiles.

Vision/Epiphany

As Paul is traveling down the road to Damascus a major event takes place that is not easy to picture or fully comprehend. Luke describes it in Acts 9:3 in the following way, “light from heaven flashed around him.” Paul in his later descriptions of the event in Acts 22:6 and 26:13 puts even more emphasis on the overpowering light that flashed before him. In fact in Acts 26:13 he claims the light was “brighter than the sun.” Clearly the type of light and the impact of this light was something Paul would never forget. This was no ordinary, natural light but the light that only God possesses. This light was so bright it blinded Paul; however “Paul’s conversion experience is an experience of revelation described in terms of seeing,” affirmed in several passages, where Paul explicitly states that he saw Christ (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8) (Thurston 2003:236).

Beyond the sight sensation of this encounter, there was an audible voice which Paul heard and even replied to. Jesus engaged Paul in a conversation, asking Paul why he was persecuting him (Jesus). Paul, in a state of shock, asks simply “Who are you Lord?” thus recognizing that this being is more than an angel. Interestingly, the conversation recorded in Acts 9, and then as retold by Paul in Acts 26, have a difference in how much Jesus actually spoke to Paul. In the early account (and in Acts 22 as well) Jesus simply asks a few simple questions and then directs Paul to Damascus, promising help there. But in Acts 26 Jesus gave a more detailed description of his future plans for Paul, a description that the earlier accounts attribute to Ananias. It is not necessary to get caught up in speculating
about the compatibility of these texts because, either way, these both say that Jesus and Ananias played major roles in helping Paul know what his future was to be.

Paul clearly had a major encounter with Jesus that was real and undeniable. His companions, while they did not hear the voice or understand the encounter, were aware that something occurred outside the norm. They were also confronted by the very real physical reality that Paul was blind. So there was no denying that Paul had an incredible encounter. For Paul this was a pivotal moment, not only in his recognition of Jesus as God, but also in his apostolic authority. It became common for Paul to reference this moment of revelation as evidence that he had seen the risen Lord, just as the other apostles had. This was clearly a revelatory encounter in which God revealed himself to Paul in a very real and incredible way.

Ananias the Prophetic Healer and Disciple

Soon after Paul’s encounter God gives Ananias a vision in which he calls to Ananias and sends him to the house where Paul was staying. He gives Ananias a message to tell Paul that he has been chosen by God as an “instrument” to “proclaim” Christ to the Gentiles. Ananias is now more than a simple disciple, as he is called in Acts 9:10, but also a prophet who is used to reveal to Paul God’s future plans for him. In other words, Ananias serves as a conduit of revelation through the prophetic word he speaks.

God also reveals himself in another way through Ananias. By having Ananias place his hands on Paul, God heals Paul of his blindness, working through the hands of Ananias to reveal his power over Paul’s physical deformity caused by the light that Jesus had flashed before him three days prior. Ananias therefore is a vessel of revelation on several counts, and the text shows that he was a faithful revealer of God’s will.

As a disciple Ananias does one more act that is also crucial in the revealing process for Paul. He takes Paul to join with the other disciples who were to be found in Damascus, the very people Paul had come to imprison and possibly kill.

The Way as Scripture Interpreters

Acts 9:20-22 mentions that Paul could not stay quiet for long. The passage says that he went out into the synagogues and began engaging with the Jews, and in fact, he “baffled” them by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. Implied here is a very key point in the revelation of Jesus to Paul. In order to “baffle” the Jews, Paul would have had to share more than his incredible encounter testimony. In fact what is implied in this text is that
Paul was actually able to show the Jews from the Scriptures who Jesus really was.

While it is true that Paul was well versed in the OT Scriptures from a very young age up until this transformative encounter, he still did not find Jesus of Nazareth in those Scriptures prior to this point. How does he move from his pre-encounter understanding of Scripture to his Acts 9:20-22 understanding? The simple answer is that it was through the community of disciples known as The Way or the Early Church.

This group served as the hermeneutical community which guided Paul in helping him interpret his encounter of Jesus by showing how Scripture revealed Jesus (Hiebert 1994:91). Paul had encountered Jesus on the road, but there were still many details to be filled in. He had also encountered Jesus through the healing and words of Ananias, but this also left gaps in his understanding. It was his time spent with the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19b), which would have included Ananias who Paul later calls a “devout observer of the law,” who would have helped him gain a clearer understanding of the Christ as he is revealed in Scripture. Thus, Paul is able to go out to the synagogues and show his fellow Jews from the Scriptures who Jesus of Nazareth really is.

Paul’s Return to Antioch

For a variety of reasons Paul was not able to fully engage in ministry in Jerusalem and therefore returned to his native city of Tarsus. Sometime later, as the multi-cultural church in Antioch began to grow, Barnabas recognized the need for a leader who could easily relate to and engage with this diverse group. It was at this time that the Holy Spirit prompted Barnabas to remember Paul who was in Tarsus. Barnabas searched him out and brought him back to the diverse church in Antioch where together they not only aided the church but helped foster major growth.

In many ways Antioch became the proto-type for how the church should function. This multi-cultural setting served to continue the revelatory experience of Paul who now was also actively engaged in revealing Christ to others across cultural boundaries. Notice how an important aspect of the revelatory experience of Paul comes in Acts 13:1-3. Through the Spirit, God reveals to the diverse group (verse 1 illustrates very clearly that this was a very diverse group) that God has called Paul and Barnabas to now engage in the work that Jesus called Paul to several years prior on the road to Damascus (Stott 1990:216-218).

Once again the community becomes an agent of revelation by facilitating the call of the Spirit through the laying on of hands and affirming the Spirit’s sending of the two men. Paul’s intercultural experience and call
at Antioch would play a major role in how he would move forward in revealing Jesus to a diverse Gentile world that God was calling him to.

One could try to argue for the primacy of various forms of revelation over the others, but this paper is not interested in that debate at this particular juncture. Christ serves as the tie that binds the revelatory encounters into one cohesive unit. In each instance of revelation it is Christ who is manifested, in some forms more clearly than others possibly, but each one feeding off of and feeding the other. Each revelatory encounter revealed Christ in a unique way, while at the same time the encounters worked to mature Paul’s understanding, building on prior encounters and revelations. Christ was the center and thread woven throughout each revelatory encounter. What does this mean for theological method? The next major section of the paper will attempt to flesh out the implications in light of Paul’s encounter and subsequent witness through his testimony in Acts and the epistles he wrote.

**Personal and Dramatic Experience**

**Christ as the Center**

It does not take an overly quantified amount of study to recognize that Paul’s life and teachings, or put another way, his theological framework, was centered in Christ (Rom 15:17, 18). It must be stated that while Paul is Christ centered, the Christ he knows and shares is not a being alone, but a being in trinity. This must not be lost sight of for Paul’s Christ-centeredness was really Paul’s God-centeredness. And all was viewed through the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Christ whom Paul knew relationally, starting with his Damascus road experience and moving forward.

But the discussion must now move towards looking at Paul’s experience of revelation, in its various forms and how they relate to Paul’s understanding of doing theology. Looking at Paul’s encounters with God, as shown in Acts, will guide the discussion, but the discussion will move beyond this to the wider corpus of Paul’s writings.

**Paul’s Encounter Outside of Scripture**

Systematic theologians throughout the last several decades have spent large amounts of prolegomena space on describing the difference between general revelation and special revelation. These have become the common denominators in most discussions on revelation. Thus, this issue need not be re-discussed here. Paul’s encounter, however, may actually create a problem for some theologians in that it seemingly blurs the lines between these two types of revelation that are often strongly separated by theologians.
The physicality of the Damascus road encounter is essential for it to have any real meaning. Paul the persecutor needed a major shock to get him to not only stop what he was doing but completely turn and change his focus and direction. At the same time Paul’s experience was outside the Bible. In other words, here was a man who knew the Scriptures of the day as well as any and yet had not encountered Christ in them. He needed an encounter that was more direct than reading words on a page, no matter how inspired those words were. He needed a light to shine on him that was brighter than the sun, and he needed to see Jesus in order to take him seriously.

Continuing with the above train of thought, Paul’s experience was probably tested by Scripture, but it would also have to be noted that Paul began to view Scripture through his experience. In other words, yes the church of the day probably needed to verify Paul’s experience by checking to see if it fit well into a scriptural framework, but it also had to read Scripture in light of what happened to Paul. For Paul, at the very least, Scripture was dramatically “changed” from a dry book of law, to a drama of Christ’s story which he now found himself in the midst of.

Theological Method and Personal Encounters

Any theological method that neglects Spirit-led encounters and experiences pointing to Christ that people have with God faces the danger of not being a dynamic method but rather a static method that begins to depersonalize God and turns theology into a mere scholastic study that dissect passages of Scripture. Paul’s experience is simply a more dramatic version of all those who have experienced God’s presence at some point or several points in their lives. The theologies of the Global South can be of great help to the Western theological method in this regard because they often seem to naturally recognize more readily God’s working in encounters outside direct Bible reading. It is not uncommon to hear of people having dreams of Jesus or experiencing healing from Jesus in the Hindu and Muslim contexts, which is often the starting point of their journey to and with Christ (Doyle 2012). If we are honest with ourselves, most people even in the Global North, have had conversion experiences or moments where they encounter God in special ways. A theological method that is Christ centered should also be willing to take seriously the many testimonies of Christ working in people’s lives.

There is one last point to be made before moving to the next section. The initiator of Paul’s encounter was God. Jesus reveals himself to Paul while he was yet a sinner, and he did it in a concrete and unmistakable way. God met Paul where he was. Furthermore, it will become clearer as this paper progresses, that this principle (as experienced by Paul) would
have a profound effect on the way Paul proceeded to do theology and work in mission.

Connecting Christ-centered Experiences with Method

When doing theology, personal experiences with God as a form of revelation are often neglected. As noted above, theologians from the Global South tend to understand and articulate this type of encounter much better because they tend to take these types of experiences more seriously. There is no doubt that a vast majority of Christians would be able to describe some sort of event, not necessarily as dramatic—although in some cases maybe more dramatic—but certainly just as life transforming as Paul’s in their own lives. Yet, when doing theology there is a fear that we must not allow our experiences to become part of the hermeneutic we use (Ward 1994:221–223; Kärkkäinen 2014:63, 72). What this does is cause a disconnect between real life experience and the actual way people articulate their faith. This in no way invalidates Scripture or other forms of revelation, but rather is part of the interplay between various forms of revelation. The key component is that the experience or encounter is with Christ (Walls 1996:43–46).

People’s Role as Revelatory Conduits

Ananias

God was also clear in his brief conversation with Paul on the road that he was to meet a man in the city who would help him. After three days Paul and Ananias met. When they met, Ananias not only spoke to Paul, but as he prayed with him God healed Paul of his blindness as well. This is yet another aspect of God’s revelatory encounter with Paul, but this time through a faithful follower. Simon Kistemaker notes that it is an “interesting fact that Ananias, who is a disciple but not an apostle, serves as Jesus’ instrument to work a healing miracle and to confer the Holy Spirit” (1990:343). Paul would also, in his own ministry, reveal Christ through acts of healing and other signs and wonders (Rom 15:19; see also 2 Cor 12:12). There is no doubt that Paul also shared the details of his encounter with Ananias who was probably shocked, but also encouraged by this miraculous story. So begins Paul’s fellowship with the believers, which would become a major part of Paul’s focus over the coming years. Most of Paul’s epistles are not theological tomes but rather Paul’s inspired counsels to the churches which were filled with people he loved.

What is important to note at this juncture is that the process of
revelation continues through this interaction between Paul and Ananias. Paul is brought to a “devout” man, who was strong in the Jewish tradition but also a follower of The Way and even called a “disciple.” He receives a revelatory vision of Paul and his future, which he then shares with Paul. Therefore, Ananias acts as a conduit of revelation. God works through this faithful servant to reveal himself to Paul. This is yet another example of revelation taking place outside the direct locus of Scripture. Keep in mind that this paper is not attempting to put all forms of revelation on the same level, as later sections will make clear. But at the same time there can be no doubt that Ananias, a sinful human being like everyone else, was used by God as a conduit of revelation to Paul.

Paul needed this added form of revelation to help him start to make sense of his Damascus road encounter. It is important also that the man chosen as a revelatory vessel was not just any man. God worked within the context in such a way that he chose the very best person to continue revealing himself to Paul. At this point in time, Paul would no doubt have struggled to receive further light from anyone other than a devout follower of The Way who was also a strong Jew. Ananias was just such a person, and thus God in his wisdom contextualizes his revelation in a way to give it the greatest chance of impact. There will be more on this in the section on culture later.

Impact on Theological Method

God revealing himself through human conduits has a major impact on how people think about and do theology. The connecting strand is Christ. Both the person having the experience and the person hearing about it are sharing Christ with each other in somewhat different ways. Both are acting as conduits of revelation, used by God to further an understanding of the faith they both have in him. Therefore, theology that does not take people seriously is an incomplete theology. In other words, if it is true that people are encountering Christ, whether on a scale with Paul or not, then it is also true that people are conduits of revelation and that their stories are not only worth listening to but essential in the pursuit of an understanding of faith.

Paul, on several occasions, spoke about his testimony as a revelation of Jesus (1 Cor 2:1–2). Beyond that, a quick read of the greetings in many of Paul’s letters show that Paul was in intimate contact with a large number of people, both women and men, who continued to impact his experience with God. “Testimony is not [simply] a synonym for autobiography” (Stott 1990:178), but also a conduit to reveal God. For some it may reveal God to them for the first time, for others it may add light to their current
relationship with God. This means that the doing of theology must allow for the stories of others to be heard and also allow them to help shape people’s understanding of God. The key is that the stories must uplift Christ and be centered in the Triune God, or as Paul puts it, “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

Orality

Anyone who has spent time or grown up in predominately oral cultures can more easily understand the importance of non-textual communication. The Global North is made up of textually-based cultures. Reading and documentation have been the ways of passing on knowledge and values in the Global North for several centuries, whereas the art of story-telling and passing on important cultural knowledge orally has not been a major part of the Global North’s perspective. That is currently changing with the shift to narrative being concretized in the social media revolution that has swept the Global North, but in many ways it is still a text based culture.

Anthropologists have shown that oral cultures have a similar ability to pass on values and concepts as accurately as text-based societies. A “word in season” is worth much more than a “book shared” in such cultures. Experience is interpreted and understood in the stories told, and passed on. This is not to say text has no valuable role to play in these societies or that the Bible is invalid (Arrington 2015:398–412). What it does is help people understand that the telling of a story in many places has a deeper impact on both the listener and story teller than reading a text (Peterson 2009:98–109). The biblical world was also much more oral than text based. The narratives and wisdom literature of Scripture were primarily passed on through oral methods as opposed to mass-produced text—which of course was to come much later after the printing press was invented. This in itself should force theologians to rethink the power of testimony as a form of revelation. For much of history, and even in many current cultural situations, the spoken word is of primary importance.

A challenge arises however, when the power of experience above is taken seriously and understood. If each person has their experiences and they go around telling others and the listeners also go around telling their experiences, there is little cohesiveness. There needs to be a guiding point of contact, which is essentially the Triune God as revealed in the Incarnate Christ. But even this statement is not enough to really give cohesiveness to story-telling, encounters, and experiences lived and testified to.
Implications for Doing Theology

All of the above headings in this section have profound implications for doing theology. First of all, the importance of recognizing the role of people in revealing who God is becomes much more important. This obviously elevates the role of mission and ties mission and theology together. As people share their testimony they share God and as one listens to others one listens to God in a sense. In order to construct a valid theological method, one has to take seriously the testimonies of others. Not just the “veterans” of the faith, but even the “newbies” in the faith. Ontologically speaking, the shared stories of people concerning their encounters and relationship with God is a move towards a working theological knowledge of who God is. The stories cannot be the final arbiter, nor can they be viewed as completely trustworthy, but they must be taken seriously. Without the witness and testimony of people there is a real risk that God becomes a mere scholastic concept stuck in a book.

The Community of Faith Seeking Understanding

Engaging with The Way

What is interesting at this juncture in Paul’s newfound experience is where he resides for several days and what he does as a result of where he resides. Through Ananias, Paul was introduced to the community of believers known as The Way. This was the wider group, the disciples of Jesus in Damascus. There are not many details as to exactly what Paul did while he was with them, but what he does after being with these believers gives us a major hint as to what he was doing.

Acts says that soon after that Paul went out and began engaging with his fellow Jews, and in fact, was “baffling” them with his ability to show Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:22). There is only one way that Jews would be baffled in this situation. If Paul simply told them about the Damascus road experience or even about the words of Ananias the wider Jewish community would not have taken him seriously. This passage instead implies that Paul was able to show them through Scripture that Jesus was the Christ, and this is what was truly baffling.

Keep in mind that Paul knew the Scriptures long before coming to Damascus; yet through all his study and time with Scripture it had not brought him to Christ. When he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus God did not direct Paul to scriptural passages or give him a Bible study. Even Ananias, in that first meeting, does not mention Scripture. So how did Paul come to begin a journey of finding Christ in Scripture?
The community of faith in this instance carries on the work of revealing God to Paul. They act as a conduit to point Paul to the God of Scripture who matches the God of his experience and the God that Ananias spoke to him about. It was in this group that Paul was able to begin to see the riches of the OT witness to Jesus. It was also in this group of believers that he was able to interpret his own encounter more clearly. The community of faith gave meaning to his encounter and to Scripture. God revealed himself to Paul through the community of faith. Paul also reveals Christ to the wider group through his testimony. The community finds meaning and cohesiveness in the shared stories of its community members. Revelation goes in every direction inside the community of faith. Thus Paul can say to the church in Rome, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom 1:1–12).

Antioch

The group in Antioch performs a similar function to the small group in Damascus. The multi-cultural group in Antioch is more than simply another church planted (Walls 1996:17, 18). It also plays the role of revelatory conduit for Paul and Barnabas. First, it is here that Paul gets his first sustained engagement with ministry, at least as far as the record of Scripture is concerned. It would seem that much of Paul’s approach to theology finds its roots in his Damascus and Antioch experiences, because it was in these places that God called Paul to mission to the wider Gentile world.

Notice carefully how God called Paul and Barnabas. Rather than a direct vision or word from God the Spirit informed the group as a whole of God’s plan for “setting apart Paul and Barnabas” for the “work” God had indicated to Paul way back on the road to Damascus. It was most likely through the prophetic role of some of those present (Acts 13:1) that God revealed his will through the Holy Spirit (Kistemaker 1990:455). Once again the church played the role of revelatory conduit, only this time as an affirming group who recognized God’s call and laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas to send them off.

Importance of Community

Before dealing directly with Scripture it is important to look more carefully at what it means for God to reveal himself through a community of faith or the church. A cursory look throughout scriptural history leads to the conclusion that God primarily works through groups not just individuals. This is not to downplay the major role individuals played...
throughout scriptural history. But the roles of these biblical characters almost always seemed to find meaning when understood within the community. Whether it be Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, or Esther, it was the community that provided the context for and in many ways gave meaning to their stories (Tompkins 2015). Sociological research, has in many ways, proven that part of the essence of what it means to be human involves communal interaction (Grenz and Franke 2001:231).

Bringing the Personal Encounters Together

It is the church that brings the experiences and encounters into a place of contact and puts them together, creating a “mosaic of faith” (Grenz and Franke 2001:49). “In a sense, to be Christian is to be a storyteller” and the stories are told in communities of faith (48). The stories brought together can also be critiqued and interpreted more clearly. When the encounters and experiences are left to the individual, or even to a small group of close friends, there is a tendency to misinterpret the encounters even when using Scripture. This is due to the sinful, selfish nature of humanity and its natural tendency towards self-deception and ethnocentrism.

The church, on the other hand, becomes a place where theology more safely develops. Notice that it is in the church, not the academy, that this is done. This is a move away from purely academic theology to community-based theology (Greenman and Green 2012:62). Of course this is an ideological picture of the community of faith, unfortunately it is not always as safe as one would hope, but the alternatives are worse (Grenz and Franke 2001:213; Vanhoozer 2000:80). Patient listening and humility are essential in order for the wide variety of stories found in the community to have a voice and a say in the theological method. Without the community of faith people are left to choose how to interpret their stories and also how to act on that interpretation individually.

Because the triune God is communal in nature, it is impossible to understand God without also being communal. The community of faith is where God is revealed in a wider way than the other two forms of revelation discussed above. The church becomes God’s revelation to the world as a body in mission beyond the individual witness of the members. But the experience of the individual members is essential to give the wider revelation meaning. The community, however, must be willing to reflect critically on its past and tradition in order for the community of faith to avoid becoming traditionalists and historicists in the sense of idolizing the past. Tradition may have the potential of cutting off God’s present revelation through people, the Bible, and even through the traditions themselves, if they are viewed outside of the interplay of revelations.
Community and Theological Method

What does this mean for theological method? Any theological method which does not allow itself to be critiqued and even created in the community is not a dynamic method that can relate to real life. Christ and the church are inseparable and therefore theological method must also take the church seriously. Without the interpretative help of the wider faith community theology runs the risk of individualistic God talk and sterile religion for the private world of the individual (Grenz and Franke 2001:224).

The Norming Norm

The article thus far has been very limited in addressing Scripture as revelation. There have been hints here and there, but I have purposely avoided Scripture until this juncture. Most discussions on revelation are ultimately discussions about the role of Scripture as revelation. Unfortunately they often leave behind the other forms of revelation discussed above as though they are not connected.

Paul and Scripture

If one were to remove all the OT quotes from the writings and sermons of Paul one would be left with almost nothing. Paul’s sermons and epistles are through and through biblically based. He often uses statements like, “the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2). Paul clearly had a very high view of Scripture and was constantly promoting a scriptural approach to theological thinking and mission praxis.

As was briefly noted in the section on community, Paul encountered Jesus through the community when they helped Paul encounter Jesus through Scripture. Paul was an astute scholar of the OT, having grown up in the context of the Pharisaic worldview. But it was only after his Damascus road experience that Scripture became more than a book, but an actual meeting place between Paul and God. Paul encountered Jesus in Scripture and then traveled the world helping others do the same. Paul’s understanding of Scripture as revelation actually included the mission element; he says in his letter to the Romans that Scripture has revealed God “so that all nations might believe and obey him” (Rom 16:26).
Scripture, Theology, and the Interplay of Revelatory Forms

As the example of Paul and his writings remind us, Scripture and theology are closely tied together. Jesus is not just Incarnate, he is the Incarnate Word, and Scripture is where this Word is most clearly revealed throughout history. And this will happen continually even into the future, until Jesus returns. Scripture contains all the elements that are found above in textual form (Rom 1:2). Scripture has a wide variety of encounter experiences, recorded through inspiration, that are meant to continue on as stories to be told between people. They are stories that are meant to shape and norm the mosaic created by the community. Much current theological thinking emphasizes a narrative approach to Scripture, or Theodrama as one theologian put it (Vanhoozer 2005; Vanhoozer 2006:110). What this potentially does is free Scripture up from the stagnation of “written” text to “living, breathing Word.” It is not to say that all readers of Scripture must become narrative theologians, but that Scripture is about God’s revelation throughout history, in real encounters with real people who then incorporate that revelation into real life situations lived in relation to God.

This is one of the reasons why comparing Scripture with Scripture is so essential. The revelation of God becomes clearer and history begins to gain meaning in the context of the metanarrative of Scripture (Wright 2006). But Scripture read outside the influence of encounters and experiences is Scripture without meaning. In other words, simply comparing Scripture with Scripture in a closed-off room will eventually become a futile activity. Experiences and encounters must take place in order for the stories of Scripture to have their full revealing power. Beyond that, Scripture that is not read in community, but rather as an individualistic Scripture, is in danger of becoming the word of the reader not the Word of the author, the Spirit. Scripture is interpreted by the individuals and communities who engage with it, just like every other encounter with God. As seen above, Scripture must go through an interpretative process. But Scripture is unique in that it also informs the interpretative process by revealing to the reader and the hermeneutical community Christ who is the Word of Scripture (Vanhoozer 2000:74). In other words, as the individual and the community interpret Scripture together—and it is essential that it be done together—it is from Scripture that they find the norm for interpretation, not only of other parts of Scripture, but also for all the experiences that make up the mosaic of the faith community.

Interpreting Together

Paul needed an experience to help him see God in Scripture, but at the
same time he also needed the Word to give any type of meaning to his encounter. Beyond this the Word and the encounter only find real meaning when testified of and shared in the community of faith, which then aids in the interpretative process. This is an unending hermeneutical spiral.

There is another unique role that Scripture plays. While the encounters, experiences, and members of the community may share certain characteristics with each other, ultimately if left with only these as forms of revelation there would be a confusing cacophony. Scripture does not change, because it is the Word of the God who also does not change. In a sense then, Scripture is a stabilizer in a world that is constantly changing and in which experiences also change. This does not mean that interpretation does not change; to the contrary, interpretation does and must change—not that every interpretation must change but that no interpretation must be viewed as necessarily final—to continue to be a dynamic revelation. However, underlying that change is a sameness in that Scripture has not changed, only the interpretation has (Walls 1996:11; Vanhoozer 2000:87). In this way Scripture acts as a source of solid revelation that cannot be moved. Scripture is normative.

Scripture as the Final Arbiter

Scripture can be translated and can cross cultures, unlike any other form of revelation, precisely because of its inherent nature. In a sense Scripture incarnates over and over in much the same way that Jesus incarnated to earth.

It is ultimately Scripture that “stands in judgment over all” of our experiences, cultures, and “theological expressions” (Grenz and Franke 2001:71). It is interpreted Scripture, but Scripture nonetheless. Scripture also reveals God in a way that helps people see more clearly the paths that lead away from God. Experience struggles to do this, even the community cannot fulfill this revelatory role like Scripture does (see 2 Cor 11:1–4 for an example of this). Because Scripture records the repeated human encounters with God through history, it helps judge our own stories and the community’s mosaic of stories.

It is Scripture that can both critique and confirm our experiences and encounters, because it is where God has chosen to record how he reveals himself in a variety of settings. Scripture can critique my North American worldview and my wife’s Indian worldview at the same time, but in dynamically different ways. This brings me to my final point about Scripture. Scripture would seem to reveal God best when understood dynamically. Not that Scripture changes, which it does not, but that interpretation of Scripture does. So in reality, Scripture, as understood in
light of faith, is inevitably dynamic and when understood in interplay with the other forms of revelation this is perfectly safe and even a good thing (Kärkkäinen 2014:71).

But What about Culture?

Anthropology and sociology have shown that culture is a given reality. There is no way to live without being part of some sort of culture. Therefore, to argue that Christians should avoid culture or that the Bible speaks against culture does not fit with reality. A more appropriate understanding is that culture is real, and also, like everything else on earth is affected by sin and therefore there are no perfect cultures.

Culture and Scripture: Towards a Biblically-shaped Worldview

Any person who reads Scripture or experiences God is inevitably influenced by the culture they are a part of. Andrew Walls clearly articulates this when he says:

The fact, then, “if any man is in Christ he is a new creation” does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is true for groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches—including our own. (1996:8)

Once this is understood, this can help people as individuals and faith communities to more carefully reflect on the role their various cultures are playing in their experiences and even their readings of Scripture.

But as the above section demonstrated, there is a spiral here as well. The reading of Scripture is not only influenced by the reader’s cultural viewpoint, but can also influence the reader’s viewpoint so that it actually acts as an agent to transform culture. As a result missiologists are using phrases like “biblically-shaped worldview” or “transforming into a biblical worldview” to describe the interplay between culture and Scripture. There is a danger however, when a theologian or missiologist believes they have discovered the totality of what a biblically-shaped worldview looks like based on their study this side of the eschaton.

Method and Culture

If the above is true, then one’s method is influenced by one’s culture,
whether the person realizes it or not. Not only that, but it begs the question, what is to be done with so many cultures around the world? If there are so many cultures, does not that mean that there will be innumerable interpretations of Scripture (Hiebert 1994:97-103)? In some ways this is true, but the above discussion of Scripture is important here. Scripture does not change and has proven that it can be translated into any language. Keeping in mind that culture and language are intimately tied together so that one cannot exist without the other, it then becomes clear that Scripture is a God-breathed miracle in its ability to be applicable in all cultures. As Andrew Walls has so aptly put it, theology continually crosses cultural barriers creating a situation in which “the theological workshop never shuts down” (2012:26). This should be encouraging and in some ways creates a type of excitement at the possibility of discovering God in new and profound ways by engaging with all the different interpretations and experiences (Walls 2012:33; Grenz and Franke 2001:67).

The Incarnation Principle

The Incarnation is a perfect reminder of the above and brings everyone back to the center, namely Christ. The Word came to earth and dwelled on earth as a human being. Walls sees the act of Christ as in some ways a type of translation which is replayed over and over as the Word is translated into new cultures (1996:23). Christ came and lived on earth inside a cultural context. But while He was living in the context of Palestine he was also challenging the culture around him. Jesus did not promote a kind of cultural assimilation so that all would eventually be part of one culture; rather, he challenged the cultures around him to glorify him within their culture.

Paul recognized that this principle was part of who God is, and that incarnating into cultures was an essential part of being a revelatory conduit. Paul was all things to all people in order to reveal Christ to some so that they could be saved (1 Cor 9:19–23). When Paul says that he became a Jew or one under the law and outside the law he is simply following the example of Christ. He was flexible in how he approached other cultures, knowing that each culture was different. Paul did not critique culture itself as bad but rather brought Christ into contact with the cultures he was a part of and lived in so that the cultures could be transformed.

All revelation takes place in a culture. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus took place within a cultural context. Paul was confronted by Jesus on the road and then sent to a devout student of the law who had a Jewish background. In other words, Paul was sent to someone he could easily relate to and understand (Kistemaker 1990:337). Throughout Paul’s
epistles and the narratives recorded in Acts Paul continues this legacy by always doing his best to take the context seriously and adjust his method of revealing Christ to fit the context. Therefore, as a revelatory agent Paul is also a contextualizer. His theology is not just founded on his experience, his interaction with disciples and the faith community, and his reading of the Word, it is also grounded in a cultural setting (Vanhoozer 2006:111). This is not to say that culture is where Scripture is grounded or where truth is found most clearly, but rather to say that Scripture and people pursuing truth are cultural by their very nature. Therefore, a good theology must also be contextual. In fact all theology is contextual, unfortunately however, much of non-Western theology has been labeled contextual while often Western theology is considered more universal in nature (Vanhoozer 2006:88; Wright 2006:42; Kärkkäinen 2013:16-21).

**Implications for Theological Method**

There is a very serious implication based on the above consideration. If all theology is influenced by culture, including a person’s experience, community, and reading of Scripture, then that means there is a subtle but serious danger that must be looked out for. Much of the theological thinking and subsequent published material of the past centuries was done and continues to be done in fairly mono-cultural settings. In fact, much of the written theologies available are actually found to be from one primary cultural group, namely white, Global North, males (Walls 1996:10). David Adamo spells it out in the African context in the following way:

> Eurocentric hermeneutics have not addressed the abject poverty prevalent on the African continent. They have not addressed the oppression and the pain of witches and wizards, which is very real among African people. Such hermeneutics have not addressed adequately the problems of African ancestors and the question of land domination on the African continent. African culture and religion are not taken seriously in Eurocentric hermeneutics. (2015:62)

Slowly scholarship is taking note of this across cultures, but the change is difficult in the coming. The Global South is producing tremendous amounts of theological reflection that must be taken more seriously. Walls has forcefully argued that much like the cross-cultural diffusions of Christianity in history that have served to stymy erosion and decay within the church, so it is again in the present. The cross-cultural diffusion of the present very well may have saved Christianity from a slow death in the Western world (Walls 1996:19).

The faith community must become more intentional in taking seriously
an inter-cultural approach to Scripture and faith gatherings (Yancey 2003). Walls may be able to help when he talks about a “dual nationality,” whereby a disciple of Christ has “a loyalty to the faith community which links him to those in interest groups opposed to that to which he belongs in nature.” This means those that come from different cultural backgrounds and who view the world differently in many ways must come together (Walls 1996:9). In other words in a world that is globalized there is no longer any excuse for mono-cultural understandings of revelation, mono-cultural readings of Scripture, or mono-cultural faith gatherings. Anthropologist Paul Hiebert points out that, “theologians can often detect the cultural biases of theologians from other cultures better than they can critique themselves” (1994:91). As an anthropologist and missiologist Hiebert has been able to experience first-hand the value of a global hermeneutical community doing theology together.

Tite Tiénou, the chair of the Mission and Global Theology Department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has isolated four major issues in the theological atmosphere of the present: “the West’s ‘hegemony postulate’, the West’s self-perception that it is ‘the center,’ the perception that third world scholars as ‘purseryors of exotic, raw intellectual material to people in the North’, and the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ between the West and the rest of the world” (2006:46). He goes on to persuasively argue that while many Christian historians and missiologists have grasped the importance of these issues, many in the theological disciplines have not.

**Intercultural Necessity**

Because all cultures contain the footprints of God as well as the footprints of Satan, it is in the interest of all cultures to be engaged in a dynamic theological method where Scripture is the norm. This article argues that the most dynamic way to do theology is to engage in a method that first takes all the forms of revelation seriously, and second, does so in an inter-cultural environment. The inter-cultural environment will then bring the mosaic of faith communities closer to completion; it will bring the forms of revelation of God into a broader and more accurate light (Vanhoozer 2006:119).

This does not negate all past theological methods that did not take an intercultural approach to theology, for in many ways intercultural connectivity was beyond the ability of previous generations of theologians to comprehend or deal with. Walls points out that the norm for the NT church was intercultural communion, but over time this was lost as theology became more entrenched in certain cultural milieus. He goes on to say that there is “now an opportunity to recover” this intercultural element (2012:32, 33).
Paul’s experience again is in many ways the blueprint. It is interesting to note that Paul hailed from Tarsus, a multi-cultural city, and that much of his early ministry, after becoming a follower of The Way, took place in Antioch, which Scripture repeatedly points out was extremely multi-cultural (Acts 11:20; 13:1). It is interesting to note that it was the Antioch church that, through the revelatory work of the Spirit, affirmed the call of Paul and Barnabas to go out as mission agents.

The rest of Paul’s earthly life can be summed up as one continuous intercultural engagement. Therefore, Paul’s theological method was no doubt influenced by his inter-cultural engagements. Walls looks at the churches Paul was a part of and the theology he developed out of this inter-cultural experience and claims that “this was, surely, not simply a historic episode, but a paradigmatic one, to be repeated, even if briefly, again and again” (1996:25). This may explain why his theology is so rich and to this day unmatched by any of the systematic theology tomes.

Towards a More Wholistic Methodological Approach

Without God’s revelation, theology is of no consequence and therefore theological method unnecessary. Therefore, the above understanding of revelation becomes essential in that it recognizes the various forms of revelation as all being valid and in need of each other; however, it avoids building on one of these forms as its theological foundation. Any revelatory point can act as the starting point, leading to the hermeneutical spiral. What is important is that each form of revelation be centered in Christ and interplay with the other forms of revelation. Scripture plays a unique role in this hermeneutical spiral by being the unchanging norm that all the other forms keep coming back to. But Scripture alone cannot function in its fullest as a revelatory form without the other types of revelation.

The theological method also must take seriously the cultural contexts that revelation takes place in, which ultimately effects the theological endeavor. Therefore, as God continues to reveal himself through various forms of revelation in various contexts, it becomes essential to pursue God in intercultural settings to draw closer to him. The thread that brings it all together is God working through the Spirit, leading people to the Incarnate Word who draws them back to the Father.

If the thesis of this article is taken seriously there also would need to be a development of research in the area of other religions and how they fit into the wider conversation of revelation and culture. There is a push in today’s globalized world, to take the theological concepts of other religions more seriously, leading to a wide variety of preliminary conclusions, but this is an area that needs much more careful exploration. Finally, an
evaluation of the role mission plays in theological development is also crucial towards a more wholistic approach to understanding revelation and culture as they relate to theological method in a Christ-centered way. This paper is meant to serve primarily as a launching pad not a final say on the subject.

Works Cited


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Divine Revelation and Context: 
An Interplay of Influences

Introduction

The impact of culture on the production, interpretation, and communication of the Word of God is an ongoing debate. Some believe that “the biblical documents were produced in and to some extent influenced by culture” (Slate 1992:145). A question that comes to mind is, Why would God take into consideration the human framework in the process of revealing his Word? Do contexts shape the way people understand the gospel? Glenn Rogers responds by pointing out that “God uses human culture as a vehicle for interaction and communication with humans because human culture is the only context in which humans can communicate. This is not because God is limited. It is because humans are limited. Human culture is the only frame of reference humans have. If God wants to communicate with humans it must be within the framework of human culture” (2004:28).

In this interplay of influences, divine revelation quite often challenges human contexts because human activity has been tainted by sin and because humans cannot intelligibly relate to what is outside their frame of reference; therefore, God uses what is already available in human context to package his revelation. It is important to state that God very often used the cultural material available to his hearers to express his will for them by purging the available cultural material of any evil implications.

This article aims to consider some of God’s usages of culture in the process of communicating with humans and the implications of this on mission and ministry practices today. Four biblical cases showing the interplay of Scripture and culture include covenant-making and divination in the Old Testament, the incarnation of Jesus, and the cultural considerations of mission and ministry in Acts 15.
The Old Testament: The Use of Cultural Material in Biblical Revelation

God’s revelation in the Old Testament took into consideration various aspects of ancient Near Eastern cultures. Those cultural contexts served as the incubator for peoples’ thought and literature during biblical times (Flanders and Crapps 1996:50). The following two examples provide a unique perspective of how God used human culture to communicate his purposes in Old Testament contexts.

Covenant-Making in the Ancient Near East

Making a covenant was one of the most widespread cultural practices in the ancient Near East. Donald Wiseman comments that “the covenant idea and its terminology formed the warp and woof of the fabric of the ancient Near East society” (1982:311). In this context, “covenants were a way of creating family-like relationships beyond the natural family” (Foster 2010:205). Agreement on mutual obligations were part of entering into a covenant. Foster further explains that “the parties invoked the gods to punish any failure to keep the commitment. This invocation could be in words or in ritual—for example, the sacrificial dismembering of an animal stood for what should happen to the person who broke covenant” (Foster 2010:205). The dismembered animals were laid on the ground and “those making the covenant had to pass between the divided carcass. This symbolized the seriousness of their intentions to keep the covenant, because the divided carcass represented what would happen to them if they did not keep their oaths. . . . Then after they passed through, the carcass was burned, symbolizing their acceptance” (Ritenbaugh, n.d.).

It is believed that the development of the Israelite belief in a covenant between God and them as a nation or as individuals was influenced by the widespread use of covenant-making in the ancient Near East that regulated relationships between an imperial overlord and his vassals (Amos 2007:73). It is interesting to see God using this means of covenant-making in Gen 15. When God used this widespread cultural practice associated with entering into a covenant, God helped Abraham understand very clearly his intention to keep his promise to give him a son. There was no commitment on the part of Abraham. Perhaps that is why only God passed between the divided carcass to show Abraham his seriousness to meet the requirement of the covenant. It was as if God was swearing by himself or putting his reputation on the line.
Divination by Stones

Another example of the use of cultural material in divine communication is the use of stones. Dreams, prophets, and the Urim and Thummim seemed to have been the primary method of divine communication in the Old Testament (1 Sam 28:6). The Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:1-30) were two of the twelve gemstones decorating the high priest’s breastplate serving as an oracular media by which the high priest was made aware of God’s decision for the people (Num 27:21; Deut 33:8; 1 Sam 28:6). It is suggested that a “halo of light encircling the Urim was a token of divine approval on matters brought before Him, and a cloud shadowing the Thummim was evidence of disapproval” (Nichol 1978:649).

Consulting oracles in times of crisis was widely practiced in the ancient Near East before Israel existed as a nation. Besides hepatoscopy (liver divination) in which contours, marks, and colors on the liver of a sacrificial animal were interpreted by a diviner (e.g., Ezek 21:6), mechanical devices were also often used to inquire about future events. Psephomancy (divining by stones) was used by the Akkadians as a means of divine communication. For Victor Hurowitz, there are similarities between the Akkadian psephomancy and the Hebrew Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:30). He comments that in the Akkadian psephomancy ritual

simple questions requiring a “yes” or “no” answer are posed, and the answer is provided by two stones that seem to be drawn from a garment. Of these one is called a “stone of request” and the other a “stone of no request.” The stones were white (alabaster) and black (hematite). The Akkadian word for alabaster (gishnugallu) means “the great light,” which may correspond with the Hebrew urim (lights), while a popular name for the hematite is “stone of truth,” which parallels with the Hebrew thummim (perfection, righteousness). (2011:544-545)

What are some of the implications of these similarities for contemporary mission and ministry practices? Because “humans live in specific contexts which shape what they see, feel, value, and believe to be true” (Hiebert 2009:17), God, in his desire to be known and understood, used the cultural forms that people understand to communicate biblical truth. Instead of creating all-new forms to communicate with humans, God often pours biblical meaning into existing forms.
The Incarnation of Jesus: God’s Identification with Human Condition and Culture

Through the incarnation, God revealed himself in the fullest possible way in human terms. This was “the ultimate expression of the immanence of the transcendent Creator God, who, without ceasing to be holy, entered into the sinful world to make human beings holy and to enable them to participate in his glory. . . . [The] incarnation is the identification of Christ with the human condition and culture. The incarnation was therefore the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in human history” (Mondithoka 2007:177, 178). Charles Kraft argues that Jesus’ incarnation into the cultural life of first-century Palestine to communicate with people is sufficient proof that “God takes culture seriously and . . . is pleased to work through it to reach and interact with humans” (1996:33). God created humanity with a culture-producing capacity and “views human culture [although tainted by sin] primarily as a vehicle to be used by him and his people for Christian purposes, rather than an enemy to be [always] combated or shunned” (Kraft 2005:81). Timothy C. Tennent argues that God acts in a redemptive way within human culture as its author and sustainer. He views the incarnation of Jesus as not only a revelation of God to humanity but “God the Father’s validation of the sanctity of human culture (2010:179, emphasis in original). While Tennent warns against the uncritical divinization of culture, he emphatically states that “the true union of God and man in one person is the ultimate rebuke against the secularization of culture” (2010:181, emphasis in original).

Richard Engel sees Christ’s incarnation in the first century Jewish cultural setting as a perfect model of the interplay between the gospel and human contexts. He observes that Christ’s incarnation as a human being serves as a foundation of presenting the gospel in human contexts without compromise. Through the incarnation God met a specific people in a specific culture where they were and as they were” (1983:93). Alluding to Jesus’ incarnation as a foundation of missiological contextualization, Gorden Doss argues that Christ’s “life style would have been somewhat different had he been incarnated into another culture” (2007:192). Finally, for Allan Neely, the prologue of John’s Gospel, especially verses 1 and 14, is foundational for understanding the implications of the interplay between the gospel and human contexts. He asserts that the fuller context of John 1:1, 14 “suggests that in Jesus, God identified thoroughly with humankind, and that God came in Jesus for the express purpose of disclosing not only God’s love but also God’s salvific intent for the world” (see also John 3:16-17) (2000:474). God did not stay aloof from humanity in his effort to save them. Instead, he bridged the gap by taking human
nature, experienced human sorrows and temptation within the context of human culture. By so doing, Christ contextualized God’s love so that people could experience it and fully understand it.

**Acts 15: Culture and Christian Living**

Acts 15 plays a pivotal place in the New Testament when it comes to ecclesiology and ministry in human contexts. By the time of the Jerusalem Council, many Gentiles had come to faith in Christ. Their conversion to Christianity raised many fundamental theological questions. According to the account of Acts 15, one of the issues the early church struggled with was how to admit Gentile believers into full church membership. Was circumcision to be part of the terms by which Gentile converts were to be admitted?

After a lengthy discussion, they agreed that the Jewish “cultural specificities need not cross over the cultural bridge to the Gentiles” (Doss 2007:195). Later, Paul wrote that “circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Cor 7:19). Although the council refrained from asking Gentile believers to be circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life as a prerequisite to full church membership, they were, however, required “to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). Gentiles were allowed to live by their own cultural norms, as long as those norms were not in conflict with core biblical teachings.

Prior to this point circumcision was considered a core biblical teaching. There is no hint in the Old Testament or in the words of Jesus that circumcision was optional or that a time would come when circumcision would be done away with. This is one of those very challenging situations that force Christians to be more open to the workings of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10 and 15 Peter repeated several times that what happened in the house of Cornelius was the Holy Spirit’s doing.

The early church thus chose cultural diversity over cultural uniformity in faith expression. As a result of this agreement, “church life for Greek disciples was different from church life for Jewish disciples,” and “the cultural differences that exist[ed] between Jewish believers and other believers no longer formed a barrier preventing fellowship between them” (Brown 2006:128). A fundamental principle of the Jerusalem Council’s proceedings was that human context should be taken into account as long as these contexts do not violate biblical principles.
Conclusion

Humans live in specific contexts which shape what they see, feel, value, and believe to be true (Hiebert 2009:17). People often become so convinced by those values and beliefs that they end up seeing them as universal and normative for everyone. This being the case, it can be said that every human being comes to the Bible with contextual habits. There is a need for every gospel communicator to “master the skill of human exegesis as well as biblical exegesis to meaningfully communicate the gospel in human context. We need to study the social, cultural, psychological, and ecological systems in which humans live in order to communicate the gospel in ways the people we serve understand and believe” (Hiebert 2009:12). We must learn how to exegete both the Bible and humans but also “how to put the gospel into human contexts so that it is understood properly but does not become captive to these contexts” (13).

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I heard about hermeneutics for the first time when I started to attend a long-distance seminary back in 1989 in Communist Czechoslovakia. The teacher was using material from Roger Coon, Raoul Dederen, and others. The rules that early Adventists used in formulating their beliefs were explained to us, that is, every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible, all Scriptures need to be brought together on each doctrine, Scripture must be its own expositor, etc. (Damsteegt 1999).

I was impressed how the teachings of Seventh-day Adventists fit well with these rules. Still, as a young person I also wondered where these rules came from. For me this topic was shrouded in mystery, as I wondered why the New Testament (NT) writers were not following these same rules when citing Old Testament (OT) passages as proof for their claims. Some of their OT quotations were taken completely out of context from my point of view. I thought to myself, but they were inspired so they did not have to follow the rules we follow. This conclusion was sufficient for me at the time.

About eight years later I worked on my first hermeneutical paper dealing with the law in the Epistle to Gal 3:19–25. Reviewing the treatments of this passage by more than 20 different scholars, I could see some patterns in their interpretations. Those who were more conservative upheld a positive view of the law and the passage in question supported their view; those more liberal held a negative view of the law and this same text was validating to them as well. I realized their views on any given text were connected with their assumptions about Scripture.

Conservative Christians of all denominations see a harmony and continuity between the Old and New Testaments. They congruently view the law as an expression of God’s will. With their high view of Scripture, the law is affirmed and its role clarified after Christ’s crucifixion. On the other hand, liberals, with their various kinds of criticisms—textual, historical,
literary, reduction, canon, social scientific—and with their low view of Scripture and secular norms of interpretation, are more diverse, with a tendency to have a more negative view of the law. From their perspective Paul down-played the law by taking an unreservedly hostile attitude towards it, as if the Old Testament was a failure in contrast with Christ and the gospel.

As I studied the different interpretations I realized that different and contradictory conclusions about the law were related to different hermeneutical schools and views of Scripture. While conservatives seemed to find Christ the Lawgiver and the law of Christ compatible, liberals gravitated towards seeing Christ in opposition to the law, a view that led to many conflicts. My conclusion almost twenty years ago was that when studying passages of Scripture (especially the difficult ones), I needed to be consistent with the Adventist hermeneutical values I held and I need to avoid “unguided biblical interpretations” (Amadi-Azuogu 1996:352).

**Failure of Hermeneutics**

Later on I learned, however, that biblical interpretation is not that simple and easy. A sizable debate on hermeneutics among Seventh-day Adventist scholars surfaced, particularly in the aftermath of the 1995 General Conference (GC) in Utrecht, and has not been settled to this day. This in spite of the debate on hermeneutics published in *Ministry* magazine in March and April 1999 when there was a concerted effort by Adventist scholars to articulate the issues and move towards unity.

Angel Rodriguez described the theological differences and tensions between two camps, which he called conservative and liberal, or historical and progressive, and appealed to both sides of the debate to put aside their personal convictions and preferences in order “to preserve the unity, the message, and the mission of the church” (1999:9). William Johnsson provided nine well-balanced foundational principles/rules for Adventist hermeneutics as a possible solution to the controversy (1999:13–16).

Despite the ongoing debate, the issues were not settled as is evident twenty years later leading up to the 2015 GC meetings in San Antonio, Texas. In an effort to solve the representing topic of the debate (women’s ordination), relentless efforts were made, a significant amount of financial means invested, and time spent. Theological committees worked in all 13 divisions, the international Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) met a number of times, and books, articles and reports were published. However, the question remains, has all this effort brought the expected results? To be honest it must be said that the outcome has not produced the desired “unity,” at least not in the way most people define the word.
As the debate among scholars goes on, even after the last 2015 GC session, and new efforts made to study Adventist hermeneutics, reflection on why the extensive discussion on hermeneutics over the last 20 years have not brought the desired results is not only necessary but of great importance. If all the scholars within the Seventh-day Adventist spectrum have a high view of Scripture and yet disagree, have Adventist hermeneutics failed the church? Why are Adventists not able to unite on a grouping of hermeneutical principles? Are there yet other factors making a difference that have not yet been taken seriously enough?

To avoid the pitfalls of unrealistic expectations and bitter disappointments, Christians often are encouraged to dive deeper into their “hermeneutical subconscious” (Hindson 1984:35) so that their interpretations allow the church to experience unity in diversity to effectively fulfill its God-given mission. That is possible with a renewed and fresh understanding of our assumptions as well as how our presuppositions influence our interpretation of Scripture.

Missiological Context of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, as a science of interpretation, came to exist as a recognized discipline particularly to deal with the difficult texts in the Bible (Goldsworthy 2006:24). The purpose of hermeneutics has been to guide interpreters into the understanding of Scripture, discovering the meaning of specific texts, and to communicate a clear message to others. The field of hermeneutics was developed as a tool to actively engage the interpreter with the text to enlarge his/her horizon (not to hammer those interpreters a person disagrees with).

For some reason throughout all the years of discussion about hermeneutics in Adventist circles missiological considerations have been largely missing. Although the Adventist Church is mission driven, theology and mission do not always connect (Bosch 1991:16). Shawn Redford reminds us that correct biblical interpretation of Scripture is never accomplished solely through academic hermeneutics nor has it led to a unified systematic theology. “Rather, correct biblical interpretation took place gracefully through a complex and unpredictable set of events that were most often influenced by existing mission practice and these events likewise influenced the mission practice that would follow” (2012:8).

If the main value of hermeneutics is to bring deeper understanding of Scripture to help the church fulfill its mission (i.e., bring lost people to Christ), the study of difficult passages of Scripture should cause us to be “very humble in terms of our own hermeneutical methods and open to considering the ways that God chooses to influence us in order to understand Scripture” (8).
It must have been extremely difficult and humbling for Peter to recognize he needed to change his theological assumptions when the Holy Spirit compelled him to go to the house of Cornelius and meet with him and his friends. It was a missiological consideration that led him to obey God, and this was before he sought a theological consensus from his fellow colleagues (Acts 10). God wants Christians today to also share the Bread of Life with those lost people he intends to save.

**Factors Influencing Hermeneutics**

It seems most scholars as well as most practitioners agree on the principle “Scripture is its own interpreter” (Davidson 2003:6). Most of the studies on hermeneutics available to us work hard to flesh out this key principle. Until recently, however, Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics have been inclined to greatly underestimate “the power of the reader in coming to understanding” (Osborne 2006:29). The complexity of the interpreter’s pre-understanding and “all of the various elements in this pre-understanding do affect the results” (Meckelsen 1963:7). Osborne goes so far as to argue that “we rarely read the Bible to discover the truth; more often, we wish to harmonize it with our belief system and we see its meaning in light of our preconceived theological system” (2006:29).

Therefore, all Christians must evaluate not only themselves in order to understand their own biases and presuppositions but also all possible factors that form their pre-understanding, thus allowing them to possibly remove biases that stand between them and the text (Hindson 1984:35). One’s personality, society, culture, and worldview “act as lenses through which the Bible is viewed” (Johnson 1983:93). Better understanding of these lenses through which people view and interpret the Bible may help to better discern the God-given meanings of Scripture (1983:88).

In spite of the great number of discussions surrounding hermeneutics and the diligent work of many theologians, the Adventist Church has not been able to be united on important issues, and this lack of unity impacts Adventist mission. Therefore, it is important to reevaluate and pay attention to all factors related to hermeneutics, including the ones that have not necessarily been associated with theological interpretation. In that sense it is important to accept the advice from Stewart, who suggests “proper hermeneutics must be interdisciplinary” (2008:129).

**Five Levels of Assumptions Affecting Hermeneutics**

This article presents a missiological hierarchy of assumptions for informed and balanced hermeneutics (see figure 1). The purpose of
discovering the various levels of one’s hidden presuppositions is to be more open to the influence of God’s Word. The following sections explain the five levels of assumptions that are relevant to this discussion about the effectiveness of hermeneutics in helping scholars achieve broader unity in interpreting the Scripture.

![Missiological Hierarchy of Assumptions for Informed and Balanced Hermeneutics](image)

**Figure 1. Missiological Hierarchy of Assumptions for Informed and Balanced Hermeneutics**

**Basic Hermeneutical Orientation**

Theologians who have a high view of Scripture (belief that all Scripture is inspired by God [2 Tim 3:16–17]) will tend to have a different hermeneutical orientation than those who do not. Those who believe Scripture provides the explanation for itself will interpret the Bible differently from those who do not. If I believe the Sabbath is still the same seventh day of the week (Saturday) that God sanctified and blessed at the end of creation week (Gen 2:3), I will interpret the 192 references to the Sabbath in my Bible in a different way than if I do not.

This layer represents a person’s theological assumptions that provide a perspective on how to read the Bible. This topic has been thoroughly explored, widely discussed, and firmly established among Bible-believing Christians and Adventists. It is a blessing to approach the Scriptures as an inexhaustible fountain of divine wisdom. One’s hermeneutical orientation is, however, far from being settled since theological assumptions continue to change and develop as one moves through life.
When Paul met with Jesus and accepted his call to go and be a witness among pagans, he experienced a radical change of his theological assumptions. He stepped back and prayerfully studied Scripture for a period of time using those new theological assumptions. Then he went about his mission boldly proclaiming the good news to gentiles that one does not have to become a Jew to fully understand and follow Jesus the Messiah. I wonder what would happen if Paul was here today proclaiming the good news to secular un-churched people that one does not have to become Christian to fully understand and follow Jesus.

Philosophically Aware Hermeneutics

Whether theologians admit it or not, they all have philosophies of life they live by. There are various rules for life that influence the mind (not always theological in nature). Therefore, it is pertinent to ask how one can justify one’s beliefs and warrant one’s assertions since “too often we believe what we want to be true” (Wolfe 1982:17). One of the founding missiologists, Paul Hiebert, used an epistemological grid to categorize philosophical assumptions people work with. Needless to say, discovering my own epistemological assumptions has been rather humbling and yet the most rewarding experience in terms of experiencing God on a deeper level through his Word.

Among biblical scholars, there are naïve realists and idealists. Naïve realists are those who have a philosophy of mind rooted in a theory of perception that claims that the senses provide people with direct awareness of the external world (Wikipedia 2016d). Idealists are those who believe that the objects of knowledge are held to be in some way dependent on the activity of the mind (Wikipedia 2016b) and who assume that “true knowledge must be precise, objective, and certain” (Hiebert 1994:38). Naïve realists tend to see knowledge as a photograph or mirror of reality. Although they work with a set of assumptions, there is a tendency to deny their influence. They believe that the most important thing for people is to learn what is right because when they learn it, they will automatically do it. People holding both of these epistemological assumptions have a very difficult time accepting any other view than their own (41).

Biblical interpreters could also be critical realists or instrumentalists. Critical realists are those who accept the theory that some of our sense-data can and do accurately represent external objects, properties, and events, while other of our sense-data do not accurately represent any external objects, properties, or events (Wikipedia 2016a). Instrumentalists are those who accept a pragmatic philosophical approach that regards an activity, such as science, law, or education, chiefly as an instrument or tool for
some practical purpose (Wikipedia 2016c) and in contrast to the two earlier types recognize “the finitude of human knowledge” (Hiebert 1994:41). They are painfully aware of the fact that reality imposes some limitations on interpretation since our assumptions and biases color our perception of reality (Entwistle 2015:93). In lieu of this, critical realists are open to change and reexamine their existing beliefs. They also “allow for diverse views of reality, but on different premises” (Kraft 1994:41). As Entwistle points out, “We can humbly try to evaluate our beliefs carefully enough to arrive at a contingent certainty; that is, if our assumptions are correct and if we discern a coherent epistemology, and if we apply our epistemic methodologies consistently, then we can be tentatively certain about our conclusions” (2015:97).

In the discussion about women’s ordination at the TOSC meetings, one item of discussion was “whether men and women have different, God-given functions” (Pfandl et al. 2014:1). The differences and tensions related to this issue seem to come from differing epistemological assumptions. Naïve realists claim Adam’s headship over Eve is just a different function with no superiority or inferiority implied, while for critical realists this argument is not plausible (2014:4–7).

Sociologically Aware Hermeneutics

As social beings, humans are also influenced by their social environment, which equips them with a set of cultural assumptions. Thus, our mind is formatted with an operational system providing us with “a set of understandings by which we can make sense of what we read” (Osborn 2006:29). According to Osborn, we are all “reader response” interpreters and our pre-understanding may become too easily prejudiced, “a set of a prioris that place a grid over Scripture and make it conform to these pre-conceived conceptions.” But all theologians agree, “as readers, we want to place ourselves in front of the text (and allow it to address us) rather than behind it (and force it to go where we want)” (29). An important question is, How can this issue to be addressed?

Findings in the field of sociology of knowledge help us realize several things. First, divine revelation itself was brought to us through culturally conditioned human vessels. It was communicated to diverse cultures and comes to us with the undeniable stamp of those cultures. Second, our interpretation is indeed affected by our contemporary social context, which is not only complex but also evolving. As a result, the supra-cultural message of a text often comes as a product of our perspective rather than from the text itself (2006:506). Therefore, our hermeneutics are challenged to examine both the cultural context from which the biblical passage was written.
as well as the cultural context from which the interpreter comes (Hinson 1984:36). Our perceptions of meaning, values, truth and/or reality have not fallen from the sky nor are they external entities (Larking 1988:67).

The recent experience from the 2015 GC session in Texas indicated there was a potential for biases to stand between the interpreter and the text shaped by the interpreter’s culture, whether societal or organizational. Every serious student of the Word should admit that cultural and other biases have structured and organized their understanding of the Scriptures (Crammer and Eck 1994:207, 208). This is why every believer needs to humbly rely on the Holy Spirit to lead them into truth rather than relentlessly advocating their vapid high-toned arguments of truth. This is why it is important to read the text again and again to continuously discover new light to live by.

For too long people have taken for granted the assumptions of the culture they live in. How can God challenge people’s cultural assumptions through his Word if they keep denying they are affected by them? We claim we know the truth and yet because of our blind spots we may know nothing about the Truth. We claim we have the message and yet our message may have lost its message. When applying Scripture to our diverse cultural situations it takes hard work to determine “not just what the text meant to the original audience, but how it should be understood and applied to our contemporary situation” (Entwistle 2015:115). The Bible has a lot to say to us, however, we should not assume “the horizons of the text and the interpreter will fuse and become identical” (Larkin 1988:96).

Anthropologically Aware Hermeneutics

The term worldview is used in various circles with different meanings and significance. Some people talk about the Christian worldview, others use the term biblical worldview. Because of the possible ambiguity of such use, it is important to consult anthropologists (in most cases long-term missionaries) who work first hand with various worldviews. Worldview deals with presuppositions and hidden patterns that form a basis on which people perceive the world and organize their lives (Kraft 1996:52). Worldview drives a person’s interpretation of reality.

While cultural assumptions are more apparent and easily traceable, worldview assumptions are hidden under the surface. People do not realize their cultural assumptions as they take them for granted (especially if living and interacting with someone from their same culture). Someone from a different culture may however easily perceive different thought patterns and manners resulting from cultural presuppositions. Although worldview directs a person’s decisions and behaviors but it is hidden and subtle.
Worldview provides a person’s understanding of how to relate to people and treat them. The eighth commandment says, “You must not steal” (Exod 20:15 NLT), yet in the Old Testament, taking things from enemies after the battle was won was viewed as something normal. If someone takes something from his own people, that is immoral. The sixth commandment is often translated “Thou shall not kill,” however, in the original language this commandment speaks about murder, i.e., about unwarranted killing of one of its own (Kraft 1989:196–197).

For the Czech people (both Christian and atheists) stealing is wrong. Yet many people steal and consider it normal (regardless of belonging to the group or not). There is a folk motto from the Communist regime era that some feel is still relevant: “He who does not steal is robbing his family.” Now, killing of any kind is very wrong. In recent times many young people have become very strict vegetarians not because of health reasons but because eating meat means killing animals! Some Czech atheists have problems reading the Old Testament because of the amount of killing they find there. They are angry with God as he seems to have initiated some of the killing. Similar views come from various worldview assumptions.

If Adventist leaders decided (based on veracious exegesis of the Ten Commandments) at a General Conference session that according to the biblical worldview killing enemies is okay (incl. killing children), Czech people would have a very difficult time accepting such a view. In spite of the best intentions people would believe that Adventist leaders are untrustworthy and would become suspicious of those leaders without verbalizing their skepticism. This example is given to illustrate how important it is to always ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth. It is the Holy Spirit that humbles our hearts to reconsider what we have always believed and it is also the Holy Spirit who can bring conflicting positions into missiological unity.

Psychologically Aware Hermeneutics

It has also been established that our personalities can impact how we interpret Scripture (Johnson 1983:18). Furthermore, while we as Christians admit that our minds have been influenced by the effects of sin, we somehow tend to underestimate the effect sin has had on our hermeneutics, thus allowing our pride, conceit, disappointments, and other negative emotions to hinder us from discovering God’s will through his Word. What impact can brain physiology possibly have on our interpretation of difficult texts? Johnson claims that “understanding the function of the mind is vital to an understanding of biblical hermeneutics” (23).

A person who has a rebellious nature will respond to Scripture different
than a person who is unquestioning and compliant. In both cases “the real meaning could be distorted by an unconscious transference relationship” (49). If someone has anxiety, depression, or an obsessive-compulsive disorder or any other issue that affects their brain function, it also affects their spiritual life, perception of the world, and their perception of God (Amen 2002:26). A homophobic person may distort reality simply by trying to reduce anxiety “either by actively fighting against the thing that provokes anxiety” or by reacting “just the opposite of what he/she is really feeling” (Johnson 1983:45).

Figure 2. Four Quadrants of the Brain and Their Qualities

There is growing evidence regarding how people use their brains differently and how it can affect their perception of scriptural texts. “Research on the brain has led to an understanding that each of us has a preferred way and mode of thinking that affects the way we take in and process information” (Herrmann International). Eagleton and Muller discuss in more detail four quadrants of the brain within the cognitive domain (2011:424). Rockeys explain how every individual is born with one quadrant (or two or three) “gifted with more oxygen than the others” (2013:58). Such a quadrant has the potential to function with greater ease. Each quadrant has both positive and negative qualities. Figure 2 provides a simplified description of the qualities.
People operating with the left hemisphere tend to be more logical and rational. The left frontal is the quadrant that seeks a church that is united, however, such leaders have a tendency to be very bossy, dogmatic, pushing “their” way. Left basal (posterior) quadrant people have a tendency to interpret Scripture very traditionally (it was good enough for my grandfather, it is good enough for me) and in an orderly way. People with more active right hemispheres function more relationally. Right frontal lobe people often see new possibilities within Scripture and will have a more open-minded approach. People with a dominant right posterior quadrant have a tendency to interpret Scripture with more feelings, are sensitive to other people’s needs, gifts, etc.

Each serious interpreter of the Bible must become aware of his/her active quadrant(s) and the implications such dominance has on the outcome of his/her work. One wonders, what difference would it have made if all the participants of the TOSC had been required to take an inventory developed by Seventh-day Adventist psychologists Ron and Nancy Rockeys (available at: http://www.urfixable.com) before beginning their work to seek a clear biblical answer to the issue of women in ministry. Is it possible they would have uncovered significant psychological factors that were in play when considering the delicate issue of women’s ordination? Others have done it, why not us? (See research among Anglican clergy relating their psychological type to their biblical interpretation [Village 2010]).

Interpreting Scripture with All Our Hearts

Not long ago I was introduced to recent research about 73 heart transplants (Pearsall 1998:7, 8). The findings were unequivocally pointing to the fact that the human heart is more than just a pump, able to remember as well as feel. I went back to the Bible and studied 800 plus biblical occurrences of the word heart with almost 300 unique phrases (see also Beechick 1982:12, 13). With this new understanding and changed assumption, my perception of those biblical texts and my understanding of how God interacts with people changed.

After reviewing a summary of research on the role of the heart in learning and intelligence (Rozman et al. 1998), a picture came to my mind: Israelites gathered around Moses, listening to his final instructions. Knowing that his mission was over and his end was near, Moses kept repeating one phrase over and over and over: “with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut 4:29; 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2.6.10). Whether they were to seek God, love God, serve God, keep his commandments, return to God, obey God, they were required to do it with all their heart and all their soul.

Before applying this requirement (or desire?) of God to our topic, think
for a moment and see what it may actually mean. Scientists have observed that the heart communicates with the brain in ways that significantly affect a person’s perception (and could we say one’s interpretation). They claim “numerous experiments have demonstrated that the messages the heart sends the brain affect our perceptions, mental processes, feeling states and performance in profound ways” (HeartMath 2001:4–8). A person’s heart plays a key role in the establishment of so-called psychophysiological coherence.

Is it permissible to say that God desires us to study the Bible with all our hearts and all our souls? Could we say then that God requires us to study and interpret the Bible with well-established psychophysiological coherence especially when dealing with difficult texts? That would make it necessary to approach studying the “hard nuts” with sustained positive emotion, with a high degree of mental and emotional stability, and with constructive integration of the cognitive and emotional systems. “Since emotional processes can work faster than the mind, it takes a power stronger than the mind to bend perception” (4–8). It takes all our heart (i.e., psychophysiological coherence) to study Scripture using informed and balanced hermeneutics. I believe it would be absolutely worth it!

Conclusion

This article discussed supra-cultural, cultural, and personal factors that have an impact on one’s hermeneutics. It presented arguments that may potentially reduce the marginalization of the factors that seem to make a subtle but significant difference in interpretations of Scripture. It attempted to provide a platform for rethinking what unity in diversity is especially when interpreting the Bible in order to deal with difficult issues such as women’s ordination. To proceed towards greater unity in our biblically-based views, our hermeneutics need to include more work on mapping the assumptions that each person brings to the task of biblical interpretation. If God challenges our assumptions, he often intends to invite us for an abundant spiritual feast on his Word.

International theological committees should not function namely for political reasons, investing “in the good opinion of others” since it may cause people to misinterpret the Scripture (Johnson 1983:94). Neither is it good for one side to try to convince the other side about their truth and vice versa. Rather, we all need to be more intentional about helping our church function as an international hermeneutical community (Bosch 1991:187; Hiebert 1994:48) through which believers from different contexts challenge one another’s cultural and personal assumptions and/or biases, hold each other responsible, and yet respect and uphold each other. “We
need to listen to each other, to learn from each other” (Johnsson 1999:16)

Johnsson rightly argues that “biblical study is more an art than it is a science” (1999:15). In any case, it is important to develop an informed and balanced hermeneutic that will allow artists and scientists to work together, some using right brain hemispheres to benefit those using left brain hemispheres and vice versa. A higher level of self-awareness in our theological enterprise is indeed needed (Johnson 1983:104).

Adventists must also strive for biblically informed, spiritually grounded, and missionally sensitive hermeneutics (Redford 2012:290). At the same time, however, we must keep in mind that as humans we are never careful enough “to distinguish between what Scripture says and what we think it says (or worse, what we want to make it say)” (Entwistle 2015:111). Yes, the Bible is its own starting point and final authority in matters of interpretation. The meaning of Scripture should shape our assumptions, and we ought to avoid imposing a priori conclusions on the text (Johnsson 1999:15).

Finally, we must always keep in mind the ultimate goal of hermeneutics. The study of the Bible is not merely an intellectual pursuit. We should not argue about the meaning of the text instead of living the text (Johnsson 1999:16). We need Scripture for our spiritual growth. We learn from the riches of Scripture to share with the people of the church (1999:14). We should never forget, however, that the ultimate goal of all interpretation, which maintains the distinction between the world and the church, is for the sake of missio Dei, for the salvation of others (Larking 1988:183; Bosh 1991:389–392). Artur Stele said it well: “The world is dying of hunger and we are sitting on bread, talking about who can distribute it” (2015).

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Culture, Worldview, Biblical Interpretation, and Mission

Case Study 1

Not long ago the Seventh-day Adventist Church completed a study of the theology of ordination. The Theology of Ordination Sub-Committee (TOSC) invested an amount of money and effort into the study of just one issue unprecedented in Adventist history.

As the TOSC process has been described to me, there was a two ton elephant that wondered around the room, receiving only slight attention. That elephant was culture. When the elephant was acknowledged at all, it was through such comments as, “Well, they just think that way because of their culture!” By implication, some participants were shaped by their cultures and others were not.

Consider some differing cultural perspectives that potentially influence the view of women in ministry. Some cultural traditions are very concerned with ritual purity and impurity. Ritually impure people must be excluded from regular community life and especially from religious rituals because their presence would make rituals non-efficacious.

Female menstruation is sometimes seen as causing ritual impurity. I do not know the full extent of this perspective but believe it exists on several continents, including Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Within the last month I was told by a seminary student wife from Latin America that when she was growing up her pastor-father always asked whether she was in her monthly cycle on the Sabbaths when she was to serve on the platform.

In many Adventist churches there is an upper and lower platform. Only men are allowed on the upper platform, though women can sweep it during the week. Some churches may have two platforms for concerns about ritual impurity, others may be practicing gender hierarchy, others may be following tradition, and maybe all of the above applies in some
churches.

Some who have concerns about ritual impurity come from societies with animistic traditions. Religious practitioners must follow precise formulas and protocols for rituals, blessings, or curses to work. In this view, the worship service, communion, or baptism would potentially lose their efficacy if conducted by women who are always subject to their cycles.

One very significant cultural perspective is that gender roles must never be exchanged. Many societies assign the role of cooking to women and car repair to men and insist that men must never cook and women must never repair cars. The tasks themselves are not the issue. The issue is the separation of gender roles.

I represent a different cultural perspective on all of these illustrations. The female cycles are matters of physiology that have nothing to do with the role of women in the church. Ritual purity was part of the Mosaic laws but not part of Christian worship and piety. The efficacy of services of the church, public prayers, and private prayers depend on the will of God and the faith of his followers—not on exact formulas and protocols. Gender roles can be freely exchanged in society, marriage, and the church with appropriate communication and mutual agreement. Finally, there is no hierarchy in the Trinity between humans or between genders in my reading of the Bible.

The differing cultural perspectives described above have one thing in common—they are very deep. In fact, they probe our deepest assumptions about humanity and religiosity. What is a woman, what is a man, how shall they relate to each other, how do humans relate properly to God, how do humans relate to each other as they seek God?

Case Study 2

In the second case study a missionary couple from Brazil serves in Cairo, Egypt with the task of establishing a center of influence. Egypt has about 85 million people, of whom about 90% are Muslim and 9% Coptic Christian. The SDA Egypt-Sudan Field has about 900 members.

Good missiology rules out merely trying to import a Brazilian or any other cultural form of Adventism. Good missionaries will work to bring people to Christ who will continue to live as cultural Egyptians. Their task is to lead the local body of believers to decide which cultural elements are biblically good or neutral, which need modification, and which are to be abandoned.

Included among the issues missionaries contend with are assumptions and behaviors related to gender roles. Men are assumed to be right and women wrong when conflicts arise. At the extreme, fathers and sons
commit “honor” killings of daughters and sisters. Another issue to be dealt with is an abrasive style of conflict management. Minor differences ignite explosive confrontations.

Both case studies address the same basic issue—the relationship of human culture and the Bible. The missionaries in Egypt are engaged in a multilogue that requires them to understand the cultures of the Bible, their own culture, and Egyptian culture. If successful, they will use their own cultural form of Christianity only as a bridge to connect Egyptian converts directly with the Bible. Then the Egyptians will ask critical questions about their own culture and probe the Bible’s cultural forms to perceive its universal truth.

TOSC was an opportunity to have a multilogue where the SDA global hermeneutical community gathered around a single issue. For most of our history the North American cultural perspective of the church and theology has predominated. That dominance continues in academic and published theological work but the balance is shifting toward the rest of the world that has 93% of Adventist members. The members of TOSC were reasonably representative of the 93%. What was missing was a forthright discussion of the many cultural perspectives of the group.

**Worldview and Culture**

The case studies above involve worldview, which is our deepest assumptions about what is really real. Worldview has three main intertwining dimensions: Theological, philosophical, and cultural. Unfortunately, the cultural dimension is frequently omitted from discussions of worldview. **Some seem to think that a Christian worldview (what is a Christian worldview—do you mean a biblically shaped worldview?) excludes culture. In reality there is no non-cultural Christian worldview because there are no non-cultural Christians. There are only American-Christian, or Indian-Christian, or Korean-Christian, etc., worldviews. Christianity always wears individual and cultural “clothing.” (suggest you re-write this section)**

The culture concept gives access to a dimension of humanity that has to be part of theological reflection. Cultural particularities serve as keys to open the door to the deep assumptions of worldview because they are not easy to discern. For example, some cultures favor event time and others linear time. Event time folk do not care how long a sermon goes, so long as it is good, but linear time folk want it to stop on time. The time concept at this level is simply a matter of cultural preference. However, there are views of time that impinge on a biblically normed worldview. Cyclical time, with multiple reincarnations, contradicts the Bible’s linear time and
the great controversy metanarrative. By introducing the cultural concept of time, the door is opened to probe deeply in search of biblical worldview assumptions about time. Then the distinction can be made between mere cultural preference and deep biblical assumptions.

**Reasons for Excluding Culture from Biblical Interpretation**

In my observation, the cultures of the Bible authors and their recipients are receiving increased recognition in academic biblical studies. However, my sense is that the cultures of those who read and interpret the Word receive less attention. There may be many reasons why contemporary cultural perspectives are not routinely laid before the hermeneutical community.

1. **Not Understanding the Bible as a Cultural Document.** The Bible is assuredly much more than a cultural document but also not less. Just as Jesus was incarnated into the Jewish culture of Nazareth, so his Word was incarnated into the languages, logic systems, and historical settings of the ancient cultures of inspired writers over about 1500 years.

2. **Having an Unarticulated or Erroneous Theology of Culture.** God created humans as individuals with a culture-producing mandate. Both the individual and corporate natures of humanity were damaged by sin. The religion of Jesus is embedded within individuals who remain creatures of culture. Trying to be a non-cultural Christian is like trying to be a non-individual Christian.

3. **Wanting to Be “Objective,” Culturally Neutral, or Non-cultural in Bible Study.** Following the playbook of modernity (which is, itself, a culture) and the scientific method seems like a way to side-step the complications of engaging ancient and contemporary cultures in the interpretation process. In so doing we exempt ourselves from cultural bias, which is a fiction.

4. **Wanting to Avoid Postmodern Pluralism.** On the opposite side of the spectrum from modernity, postmodernity makes everything a matter of subjective cultural perspective. People fear losing the eternal, universal Word if any cultural perspective is introduced.

5. **Wanting to Avoid Giving Insult.** Ethnocentrism and racism are a constant danger. In the work of interpreting the Bible, of all places, one does not want to give offense to those of other cultures by being or appearing to be ethnocentric.

6. **Being Afraid of Receiving Insult.** Certain grooves of cultural sensitivity are well worn over centuries of painful history. Theologians are capable of skewering each other in very sanctimonious ways. No one wants to take an ethnocentric hit by sharing a cultural perspective.

7. **Wanting to Use Culture in Defense Mode.** Withholding one’s cultural
perspective can be a kind theological self-defense. A member of TOSC who opposed female ordination might have withheld the matter of ritual impurity because they anticipated a derisive response that would undercut their position.

8. Wanting to Use Culture in Offense Mode. Refusing to engage cultural perspectives can be a way to win the argument. A member of TOSC who supported female ordination might have introduced ritual impurity of another culture to win his argument.

9. Having a Lack of Experience. Almost everyone has experience with the shallow levels of culture at food fairs or on short mission trips. Globalization gives a false sense of cross-cultural understanding as people travel and have routine interactions with other cultures. What many people lack is experience dealing with the deeper levels of inter-cultural exchange. Imagine talking about “honor killings” in Egypt.

10. Fear of Making Theological Conflict Even Worse. The sharper the conflict, the greater the resistance to adding anything that would make it even messier. Talking about cultural issues at TOSC would have added complexity.

11. Lacking Mutual Permission and Conceptual Tools. Charles Wittschiebe was beloved in his day for giving Adventist pastors permission to talk about sex in honorable ways. Those who attend the Institute of World Mission report a new sense of freedom as they are given the permission, the conceptual tools, and a neutral-voice vocabulary to engage in inter-cultural dialogue. If women’s ordination is discussed around their tables, they report a sense of freedom, even if they do not agree. There are positive reports from multi-cultural congregations whose church board meetings become much more congenial when they learn to share their cultural perspectives freely.

Definitions of Culture

Paul Hiebert defines culture as “the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do” (1985:30).

Charles Kraft says that culture consists of all the things that we learn after we are born into the world that enable us to function effectively as biological beings in the environment. We are each carefully indoctrinated from before birth in the patterns of behavior that adults around us feel to be appropriate. By the time we become aware of what’s going on, we have already been pressed into the cultural mold. (1996:6)
Brian Howell and Jenell Paris define culture as “the total way of life of a group of people that is learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated” (2011:36).

Craig Bartholomew says that “A culture is a community whose praxis and life are shaped by a controlling story” (Bartholomew 2015:78).

Metaphors for Culture

Howell and Paris discuss several metaphors that help to understand culture (2011:38-42), and these in turn help to understand culture’s impact on how a person reads and interprets the Bible.

1. Culture as water or a river: The water metaphor implies that, like a fish, everyone lives in culture, cannot live without culture, but may be unaware of being a creature of culture. After all, the fish does not know it lives in water. Unless people’s perspective is broadened, they think their way of life is the normal, natural, proper way to live. The river metaphor implies that everyone is moving with the cultural current, some drifting along near the center and others near the edges, and still others swimming against the current. The metaphors do not fit culture completely because fish cannot change the water but people can and do change their culture as they interact with it.

2. Culture as a lens: The lens or spectacles metaphor makes it clear that everyone has a particular view of reality that is shaped by their culture. The world looks strange when viewed through other people’s spectacles. The metaphor suggests the need for one to consider and value how others perceive reality and not to think that one’s own view is necessarily the best. The metaphor is inaccurate in the sense it implies that cultural filters are fixed and unchanging, like spectacle lenses.

3. Culture as the rules of a game or as a map: The rules and map metaphors show that culture provides directions and guidelines. These metaphors are helpful but also weak because they suggest that culture is fixed and unchanging.

4. Culture as an onion: The onion metaphor illustrates that culture has many levels, from the shallow to the deep. The shallow levels include behaviors and material products. Going deeper there are values and beliefs. At the center is worldview, the deepest assumptions about what is really real and how life works.

5. Culture as a conversation: Howell and Paris prefer the conversation metaphor. “Understood in this way, culture is not so much a thing that people have as it is an activity they do. Culture is a practice” (2011:41). Like a conversation, culture is practiced dynamically by individuals interacting with others, agreeing, disagreeing, and negotiating. Individuals shape
conversations and outcomes. Just as a conversation is never repeated in exactly the same way, even with one’s spouse, so individuals do not live within their societies in exactly the same way, all the time.

Biblical Scholarship and Culture

This brief discussion of culture should remind us that biblical scholars are all creatures of culture. Furthermore, our thought processes, study methods, and conclusions are all part of specific cultural matrices. The move to exempt oneself and one’s theological work from culture is a naïve and possibly ethnocentric move that severely limits theological dialogue. “Like it or not, our view of the world and our understanding of reason, religion, language, and so forth will shape the way we work with the Bible” (Bartholomew 2015:216).

Craig Bartholomew gives an insight I will treasure. During the twentieth-century both liberal and conservative theologians worked from the same epistemological starting point of modernity—positivism. They posited a one-to-one equivalence between the mind of God and their own theological work. They both wanted to be “scientific, objective, and neutral” in a reason-based study of the text (2015:223). The difference between liberal and conservative scholars was in their conclusions. They did not realize or acknowledge that the questions they asked arose from the shared cultural assumptions of their positivist epistemology. They imagined that ten equally well trained biblical scholars from ten different cultures could remain culturally neutral and reach the same conclusions. However, “reason is inseparable from language, and like language, it is not universal but relevant to a particular culture” (295).

“The Enlightenment manifests prejudice against prejudice,” (310) as if anyone can be prejudice-free. Everyone brings cultural prejudice or baggage to the table of interpretation. Some baggage is a hindrance but other baggage—like faith, commitment, experience, and previous study—is a great asset. There is hidden baggage that unknowingly influences “interpretations within one community [and] ought to be in dialogue with interpretations of the same text within other communities” (421).

Interpreters “never read and interpret Scripture with a tabula rasa. . . . We the readers are as embedded in a history as is the text. We bring our own prejudices—prejudgments—to the text, and we are heirs to a variety of traditions of biblical interpretation” (114; 284).

Contemporary Western interpreters must confront two contrasting cultural “prejudgments.” One prejudgment is “historical objectivism” that overempowers the text by seeing it as a cold, lifeless, historical artifact to be either woodenly guarded by conservatives or sliced and diced by liberals.
in search of its original form and meaning. The second prejudgment, coming from postmodernity, has “a tendency to disempower the text and overempower the reader” (118), allowing the text to mean whatever the reader wishes.

A better approach is to empower the Spirit-inspired text, the Spirit-guided reader, and the Spirit-guided hermeneutical community who share their individual and cultural perspectives without fear. This approach replaces wooden conservatism, slice-and-dice liberalism, and loosey-goosey perspectives with the authentic and creative tension of living by the Word within culture.

To illustrate, the Brazilian missionary in Cairo lives in a creative tension that is unavoidable. Comparing his own culture with the Bible he sees imperfection. Looking at Egyptian believers he sees another set of imperfection. Looking at the Bible he prays for wisdom to be more faithful to God and to lead people of a different culture to live faithfully. His constant walk is in between multiple cultures and the Word.

The two case studies really describe the same process of walking between the Word and multiple cultures. That is why “the insights of missiology are . . . particularly relevant to renewing biblical interpretation” (83). The word that missiology uses for walking between culture and the Bible is contextualization.

**The Critical Contextualization Model**


Hiebert’s use of the term “critical contextualization” sometimes raises concerns among biblical scholars. As Bartholomew notes concerning the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, “*Critical* signifies the subjection of the biblical tradition to examination on the basis of the modern worldview. . . . *Historical* indicates that it is particularly the Enlightenment historical method that is applied to the Bible by the historical-critical method . . .” (Bartholomew 2015:208). When Hiebert uses the term “critical contextualization” (1985:186) he does not imply acceptance of the modern historical-critical method as his theological assumptions demonstrate (1985:191-192). Hiebert refers to a thoughtful, selective, intentional, analytical contextualization of the Bible to a particular culture. The goal is that the eternal, universal gospel would be faithfully expressed in a particular cultural style. The term “faithful contextualization” may be preferable.
Faithful contextualization usually has a Christian-to-non-Christian focus, as it does in the second case study about Egypt. In that setting, the contextualization model seeks to lead Egyptian Muslims or Coptic Christians to become Adventists who continue life as cultural Egyptians.

The faithful contextualization model can also be applied to internal Christian discussions as we seek to incorporate culture into the hermeneutical process. In the TOSC case study the goal would be to discuss cultural perspectives that shape the role of women in different societies, apply biblical principles to those perspectives, and make a response.

Wrong Approach: Uncritical Rejection

One option for the Brazilian couple in Cairo when they observe elements of the culture that are against biblical principles is to adopt the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) approach. Instead of struggling with the local culture they could try to take a short cut by replacing it with their own Brazilian “Christian culture.”

In the setting of biblical interpretation this approach either excludes culture as a valid part of the process or rejects particular cultural perspectives uncritically, without due consideration. The unwise interpreter would summarily reject opinions that differ from his own, believing that his reading of the Bible was unshaped by his own culture.

Cultures, as “integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values” (Hiebert 1985:30), include the “prejudices” and “prejudgments” that cannot be ignored. In reality, a *tabula rasa* is a fiction, both in missions and in biblical interpretation, because culture always remains a two ton elephant in the room. The most dedicated *tabula rasa* advocate never succeeds at his task. Egyptians remain culturally Egyptian and participants in theological discussion retain the cultural perspectives that shape their theology, even if they never acknowledge them.

Wrong Approach: Uncritical Acceptance

In the cross-cultural mission setting, uncritical acceptance embraces everything because it is cultural. In biblical interpretation, every variation is accepted in a misguided “I’m-OK, You’re-OK” move. Uncritical acceptance is a fiction, like uncritical rejection, because even the most determined pluralist will not accept everything.

The Critical Contextualization Process

The critical contextualization process assumes that every aspect of
Egyptian Muslim cultural life must be included in a comprehensive approach for a convert to become an authentic Christian who remaining culturally Egyptian. The same applies to groups of Christians in theological dialogue. Every cultural element that substantively impinges upon a particular issue needs to be addressed. Hiebert outlines three steps in the process (1994:88-90).

Step 1: Exegesis of the Culture. “The first step . . . is to study the local culture phenomenologically” (88). This means gathering and analyzing cultural data uncritically. Certain practices may be clearly unbiblical but the missionary does not try to change them at this stage. The process starts with a discussion group in which participants share their cultural perspectives in an atmosphere of mutual trust and fellowship. Participants forthrightly acknowledge the weaknesses of their own cultures and affirm the strengths of other cultures. The goal is to come to a deep, comprehensive understanding of all cultural phenomena related to the issue being discussed.

In Egypt the issue might be the combative relational style that church members continue to use. At TOSC the cultural perspective of ritual impurity would be shared, along with others.

Step 2: Exegesis of Scripture. Bible passages relevant for a particular cultural phenomenon receive thoughtful, prayerful study by the body of believers. In Egypt the texts to be studied might include the Acts 15 account of conflict management. At TOSC passages to be exegeted could include Leviticus 15 and those involving the ceremonial law.

Step 3: Critical Response. When culture and Scripture have been exegeted, a critical response and application is made by the community of believers. In a setting like Egypt, the local community would be fully engaged because they understand the cultural issues best and must live with the outcomes of the process. Three responses are available: biblically innocent aspects can be retained, forbidden aspects of the cultural element are rejected, and acceptable aspects of the item being studies should be invested with new Christian meanings. An example of the last option is the use of secular tunes for Christian hymns. “The missionary may not always agree with the choices the people make, but it is important, as far as conscience allows, to accept the decisions of the local Christians, and to recognize that they, too, are led by the Spirit” (Hiebert 1985:190).

In Egypt the body of believers would need to reflect on their cultural style of conflict and identify modifications they would like to make based on biblical conflict narratives like Abram and Lot (Gen 13) and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). At TOSC the group would decide how Lev 15:19 and other texts related to ritual impurity apply to the role of women in the church and whether the global church had the freedom to apply the texts in different ways.
Avoiding Syncretism

“The Bible is not infinitely pliable” (Bartholomew 2015:199) allowing it to suit every cultural preference. Since Christians live in the creative tension that necessarily exists between culture and the Bible, syncretism is a constant danger. In fact, Christianity in every culture, whether long established or newly arrived, experiences syncretism in different ways. The Western culture of modernity has produced syncretism, as has post-modernity. There is no “model Christian culture” because every cultures fails and succeeds in applying biblical principles in different ways. Where one is strong, another is weak. The best strategy for individual cultures to avoid syncretism is the continual process of critical contextualization that places emerging cultural trends under the constant scrutiny of Scripture. The best strategy for the world church is to encourage interaction in the global hermeneutical community where cultural perspectives are shared without being defensive and responses are given without being judgmental. The Word, the Spirit, and the collegial body of Christ work together.

Conclusion

Hermeneutics is not merely an esoteric exercise performed in ivory towers. Real life issues are involved and God’s mission to lost humanity is involved when Christians interpret the Bible. When a person studies the Bible individually every component of one’s being is engaged. When Christians discuss the Bible collectively they need to place themselves in submission before the group by sharing the factors that contribute to their conclusions. In the process every person reaches a deeper level of understanding.

Works Cited


Gorden Doss was born in the USA and grew up in Malawi. His adult service has been divided between Malawi and USA. Since 1998 he has taught world mission at Andrews University. He earned a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His wife, Cheryl (Brown), is director of the Institute of World Mission at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. They have two married children and four grandchildren who serve in Egypt and Canada.
The story is told of a woman in East Africa who always carried a large, oversized, Bible with her wherever she went. People snickered at her and children taunted her. Finally, the people asked her why she always carried her Bible with her. Why not some other book? She replied, “There are many books I can read. This is the only book that reads me.”

Hermeneutics deals with how we read the Scriptures, and there are a variety of hermeneutics. When I open the Scriptures, there is, in reality, a committee involved in the process: my age, nationality, gender, denomination, political leanings, education, etc., etc. In fact, this committee determines the books I read and the verses that I select. My faith community has a strong interest in eschatology and so the books of Daniel and Revelation rank high. Early in my (then somewhat combative) years of ministry I was tempted to think that some books “belonged” to certain denominations.

In my later (and less combative) years of ministry, I became more reflective and realized that Bible study was, at its best, actually a dialogical activity.

This picture represents the simplest form of Bible reading, common to many of us most of the time. I read the Scriptures and attempt to understand them. I ask few questions and receive few answers. It is quite
simplistic: “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s that.” On face value it sounds very spiritual and good, but it is actually very dangerous.

In this picture we draw a circle around the Scriptures. This means that I recognize that the Bible was written in a certain context, or rather contexts. This means that I must understand the time in history it was written, to whom it was written, the original language and thought patterns, etc. All of this refers to the various cultures (Patriarchal, Davidic, Babylonian, Palestinian, Greek, and Roman) involved in the lengthy writing process of these books. All of a sudden the Bible becomes a much more complex and interesting (even exciting) book. I begin to discern between prose and poetry, prophecy and counsel, narrative and legal documents, history and apocalyptic literature. Knowledge of what was happening in the world at that time enriches my reading and understanding.

In this picture we draw a circle around me, indicating that I, too, have a context, both subjective and objective. These are, subjectively, my current feelings and stresses, my frustrations, and my immediate goals. Objectively, it alerts me to that committee I mentioned earlier, my education, age, gender, politics, economics, etc. I am a complex person. We all are. The fact is, none of us read the Bible innocently. We all bring something of ourselves to the table with us.
Now we draw circles around both the Bible and me. We also see arrows pointing in both directions indicating that while I am reading the Scriptures, they are “reading” me. Not only do I make certain judgments about the Bible and what it is saying, but the Bible is critiquing me. It is asking questions about my “committee,” why do I feel and think the way I do? Are these thoughts and feelings consistent with the teachings of the Bible? If they are not consistent or in agreement, then what might need to be adjusted? This becomes a serious dialogue, especially if I give critical authority to the Scriptures, that is, if I maintain that the Bible is the standard by which my own thinking and behavior is judged.

But wait, there are other people reading the same Scriptures and disagreeing with my interpretation. It is not that they are bad or incorrect in
their interpretations, but they are different. I am forced to realize that this is both possible and inevitable. After all, they have different “committees” than I do. They may have lived in a different world (historically) than I do.

I have often referred to the story of the European teacher in a class full of Africans, reading the story of Joseph. The European saw the great lesson as Joseph’s faithfulness to God. The African pastors saw the great lesson as Joseph’s faithfulness to his family. In reality, both interpretations are correct. The difference is in the cultures of the teacher and the students. When my wife and I read the story (Mark 12:18-27) of the woman with seven husbands, we read it differently. I look at it theologically, while she feels for the poor woman being passed on down.

What is necessary is to draw arrows back and forth between the four people. This is a wonderful opportunity for discussion and deeper learning. The greater the diversity in the study group, the greater the opportunity for deeper learning and larger understanding. Everyone in the group needs to ask each other why they read it the way they do? Everyone needs to identify their “committee.”

In some cases, as with the Joseph story, both understandings may be correct. In other cases, it may make more of a difference, even a doctrinal difference on how one reads and interprets a certain passage. When differences arise with the faith community there are three options that God’s people have followed: (1) study more (see Acts 15:1-29), (2) agree to disagree graciously (see Acts 15:36–40), or (3) as with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-40), go our separate ways graciously. While unity is desired in the Body of Christ, uniformity is not.
Exercise: consider the graphic above. Assume you are one of the figures. Who do you know and regularly interact with that reads the Bible quite differently than you do? In a loving spirit, find out what you do agree upon. Find out why you disagree?

Bruce Campbell Moyer, STD, was Assoc. Director of the Institute of World Mission for many years and recently retired, a second time, from Gospel Outreach where he directed outreach among Muslims.
Systematic theologians who approach the Bible do so with a well-defined set of hermeneutical rules, such as *Sola Scriptura, Tota Scriptura*, and *Analogia Scripturae*. These principles are further augmented by more precise details, like whether the exegete understands the Bible to be thought-inspired or verbally-inspired, whether he adheres to a futurist, preterist, or historicist model of interpreting prophecy, and whether he interprets with a historical-grammatical or historical-critical method (Davidson 2010:10-29). The majority of biblical exegetes understand the Bible to be a book that contains, explains, and resides within an unavoidable historical framework, not only revealing truth for its particular setting but also echoing universal principles to people of all ages (Fee 2002:96).

In the same way, the Qur’an, its surrounding documents, and the exegetical practices of Islamic scholars suggest that the Muslim holy book also is governed by similar hermeneutical rules. Ganoune Diop has suggested that Christians should allow the Qur’an to be read according to its own “inner logic” system (2005:158). Today there is an increase in outreach materials being produced for the Muslim world. The questions that need to be asked are, in developing these materials, are missiologists bound to the underlying “inner logic” or hermeneutical system of the Qur’an?

There are some Christians who believe that the Qur’an is inspired on the same or similar level as the Bible. In order to be consistent and systematic, it would seem that this class of missiologists would need to operate within the hermeneutic structure that the Qur’an imposes upon itself. Others, who view the Qur’an as uninspired but containing some helpful elements of general revelation, will need to grapple with the question of hermeneutics. Are there consequences to disregarding Islamic hermeneutics for pragmatic reasons? If there are negative consequences, are they...
outweighed by the usefulness of wielding Qur’anic passages according to our particular needs?

This article will briefly survey some of the major Islamic hermeneutic rules. It will discuss three types of interpretive moves made by non-Muslim exegetes of the Qur’an, which include: interpreting verses subjectively without regard to the historical context as revealed in Islamic literature, utilizing verses that have been abrogated by a chronological rendering of the Qur’an, and plain eisegesis. This article will analyze these examples for the purpose of raising the question: What hermeneutical guidelines are missiologists bound to when handling someone else’s holy text?

**Historical Context**

The Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad over a span of 18 years—eight years while in Mecca and 10 years while in Medina (Al-Wahidi 2008:x). For Muslim scholars, it is undeniable that the Qur’an contains time-bound, context-specific content, such as the scathing rebukes to Abu Lahab, references to the Battle of Badr, or Muhammad’s relationship to his adopted son Zayd (see surahs 111, 3:123, and 33:37). However, the Qur’an also contains principles meant to be passed on for all time, such as “And do not kill the life that God has declared inviolable except by just right,” Al-An’am 6:151. The *ulama* frequently disagreed on the boundaries of certain passages, debating on whether particular references were meant to have a universal application or whether they were bound to the context of 7th-century Muslims. Thankfully, a certain genre of *Tafsir*, the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, offered a breath of clarity (Brown 2014:91, 92).

During the various revelations in which Muhammad received each of the 114 surahs that now comprise the entire codex, there was always a specific event. Each surah was revealed as a direct response to particular historical realities (91, 92, 202). These historical realities are known as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the “occasions of revelation,” and primarily take physical shape in the enormous body of Islamic literature, including the *ahadith* and *Tafsir*. According to Jonathan A. C. Brown, editor-in-chief of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Islamic Law*, “even an elementary understanding of the meaning of Qur’anic verses often depended on grasping the circumstances of their revelation” (92).

The *asbāb al-nuzūl* play an imperative part in Islamic interpretation, particularly for legal scholars. While these “occasions” certainly have a haggadic role of enriching Islamic narrative, their most important function is on a legal level (Rippin 1988:3). The *Tafsir* and commentaries are always sure to note the time and background situation of each surah. This concern for placing each surah in its correct historical setting is crucial...
for facilitating abrogation (naskh), the Islamic hermeneutic which maintains that a later revelation, if it happens to conflict with another revelation, cancels out or abrogates the previous recitation. This will be outlined further in another section of this article. For now, it is important to note that the asbāb al-nuzūl act as the primary external interpretive materials. Because the Qur’anic language tends to be vague or generalized, knowing the exact meaning of many passages depends on this external body of literature. The largest and most well-known collection of asbāb al-nuzūl can be found in the grand collection by Imam al-Wahidi, which documents all known events with the Qur’anic revelations (Meri 2007:i).

Following is one example from recent Adventist outreach literature how this hermeneutical principle may be overlooked. The leaflet entitled “The Baptism of Allah” utilizes Surat al-Baqara 2:138 as a springboard for talking about biblical baptism (Harnish n.d.). The verse reads, “(Receive) the baptism of Allah, and who is better than Allah in baptising? and Him do we serve.”

The leaflet goes on to discuss baptism utilizing several texts from Scripture, ending with a description of Christ’s “baptism of blood” and finally the application, “Oh dear friends this is truly the ‘baptism [or coloring] of Allah!’ Surah 2:138.” Thus the leaflet draws a direct parallel between Jesus’ baptism of suffering and the baptism that is being described in the Qur’an. If Adventists decide that pragmatism is more important than adherence to Islamic hermeneutics, then this may prove to be a fruitful way of interpreting the passage. On the other hand, if scholars feel a need to find the underlying context of the verses being used, then what is found is slightly different.

Al-Wahidi notes the asbāb al-nuzūl or occasion of revelation was, in essence, competition with the Christians (which can already be deduced to a large degree by the surrounding context of 2:138). Ibn ‘Abbas is quoted by Al-Wahidi as saying that the Christians used to baptize their babies on the seventh day and claimed that this was done to replace circumcision (Al-Wahidi 2008:9), which remains a Muslim practice even today. While Christians performed their baptismal ritual, they used to say, “Now the child has become a true Christian,” and in response to this, Allah revealed the above verse to Muhammad (Al-Wahidi 2008:10). The verse is meant to show opposition to the ancient Christian practice, not to confirm it. Furthermore, there is no textual relation to Christ’s baptism of suffering. To relate to baptism in the way the leaflet relates to it is really to say the exact opposite of the originally intended meaning.

Average Muslims might never realize the difference in meaning Adventists assign to their Holy Book, but the questions remains, “Is this wrong, or is this insightfully useful?”
Use of Abrogated Texts

The doctrine of abrogation builds itself upon two main verses, which read, “When We substitute one revelation for another,- and Allah knows best what He reveals (in stages),- they say, ‘Thou art but a forger:’ but most of them understand not” (Qur’an 16:103). “None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things?” (Qur’an 2:106).

Verses that have been revealed chronologically later, if conflicting with a previous revelation, invalidate the former one. Edward Sell describes the doctrine of abrogation with these words: “It was an exceedingly convenient doctrine, and one needed to explain the change of front which Muhammad made at different periods of his career” (Sell 1920:102).

A variety of Muslim ministries utilize the theme “People of the Book,” a group that is mentioned extensively throughout the Qur’an. Some Adventist evangelistic materials emphasize the respectful relationship that Muhammad had with the People of the Book, as expressed in Qur’an 2:109, 60:8-9, 29:46, and more. However, according to the Islamic legal system that is well accepted throughout the Muslim world, these verses, along with many others referring favorably to Christians, have been abrogated (Bukay 2007:3-11).

The nasikh (abrogator) verse for the previously mentioned positive references is Surat At-Tawbah 9:29, revealed around AD 630. “Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.” Surah 9 is considered the most violent surah, containing the famous “sword verse” and various other scathing instructions (Carimokam 2010:447). Throughout most of the Qur’an, the fury and desolation promised to unbelievers is to come to them in the time of judgment from the fires of hell. Surah 9, however, introduces a change in policy, in which Muslims are told to “fight them, and Allah will punish them by your hands” (Surat At-Tawbah 9:14). In contradistinction to most of the other surahs, surah 9 and 5 (the last two chapters revealed to Muhammad) solidify the concept of an earthly Islamic kingdom in which unbelievers (including Jews and Christians) have no place. Muhammad gives a clear, unavoidable call for Muslims to establish the kingdom of God by means of coercive violence. Only Muslims who engage in religious jihad are considered true Muslims (Surat At-Tawbah 9:13-14).
Surah 9 begins at a time when Muhammad nullified a treaty with the Arabian pagans. He declared that they must all convert to Islam within four months. Thus, it is that surah 9 begins with a reference to this four-month period: “But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful” (Qur’an 9:5).

Surah 9 can be divided into two sections, verses 1-29 and verses 30-129, the latter section having been revealed slightly later than the former (Carimokam 2010:447). Qur’an 9:29, the particular verse that is listed as abrogating the previously mentioned verses about the People of the Book, is set within the same historical context as the sword verse. Ibn Kathir offers more background in his commentary by giving a somewhat lengthy explanation of why the people of the Scriptures are considered unbelievers, namely for rejecting Muhammad as a prophet of Allah. Because the People of the Book have rejected Muhammad, thus the faith they have in any and all of the earlier prophets is void of meaning (2006:733, 734). Ibn Kathir finishes his comments on verse 29 with a reliable Hadith by Abu Hurairah: “The Messenger of Allah “P.B.U.H.” said: ‘Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you, and when you meet anyone of them on the way, force him to go to the narrowest portion of it’” (2006:734).

Clearly surah 9 cannot be harmonized with the other accolades concerning the People of the Book. The core matter to be determined is, which surahs were revealed first and which ones were revealed last? Islamic hermeneutics demand a historical, chronological reading of the Qur’an in order to deal with this form of progressive revelation. As mentioned before, surah 5 and 9 were the last two revelations to come to the prophet before his death, thus surah 9, the latter revelation (nasikh) makes the earlier revelations about the People of the Book nullified (mansukh) (Bukay 2007:3-11). David Bukay explains this change in policy in the following way:

During the lifetime of Muhammad, the Islamic community passed through three stages. In the beginning from 610 until 622, God commanded restraint. As the Muslims relocated to Medina (623-26), God permitted Muslims only to fight in a defensive war. However, in the last six years of Muhammad’s life (626-32), God permitted Muslims to fight an aggressive war first against polytheists, and later against monotheists like the Jews of Khaybar. Once Muhammad was given permission to kill in the name of God, he instigated battle. (2nd para. under heading “Abrogation and Jihad”)

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Surah 9 erases at least 124 formerly revealed verses that called for tolerance, compassion, and peace (1st para. under “Modern Revisionism of Jihad”). However, many modern missiologists continue to use earlier passages about the People of the Book that systematically are no longer valid for the believing Muslim. Islam, taken to its logical, hermeneutically accurate, and systematic end, makes it a disadvantage to be called People of the Book. While it may still be advantageous in many cases to continue ministering under this banner, some discretion may be required if speaking to a more fundamental or otherwise more knowledgeable Muslim.

Once again, Adventists cannot remind themselves too often of the past and present usefulness of resources such as these, and must also remember the fact that the majority of average Muslims are not well versed in Islamic hermeneutics and thus may not be aware of how their scriptures are being handled or mishandled. Nevertheless, the question remains: if a Muslim handed me a pamphlet that was mostly systematic and mostly hermeneutically correct, would I not suspect the pamphlet’s conclusion?

Eisegesis in Qur’anic Studies

Exegesis is what most systematic theologians attempt to do, defined by John Hayes and Carl Holladay as “a systematic process through which we reach an informed interpretation of a passage of Scripture” (2007:189). Eisegesis, in contrast, is the process of reading into the passage one’s own personal bias or other facts that are simply not contained in the text (Bell 2009). Some attempts to harmonize the teachings of the Qur’an with the Bible at times use methods that would seem to be categorized as eisegesis.

One example is found in Suleyman Romain’s book Longing for Paradise. In his chapter entitled “Then the End Will Come,” he describes the fall of Adam and Hawwa (Eve), pulling from data contained in both Genesis and surahs 4 and 7. At one point, he focuses on the meaning of the covering that God gave to Adam and Eve after the fall. From a Christian perspective, the garment is symbolic of the covering robe of righteousness that God’s people receive from Christ, the atoning sacrifice. This understanding is taken from several verses, not just the verses that speak about God making “coats of skins” for Adam and Eve before driving them out of the garden (Gen 3:21). The Genesis account gives no hint that the coats of skin had any kind of allegorical, symbolic meaning—it is as literal as literal can be. It is from other passages, such as Job 29:14, Isa 61:10, and Matt 22:11, 12, which speak more particularly about a robe of righteousness or wedding garment, that Christians find additional information to flesh out salvific ideas about the garments.
In Longing for Paradise, Romain quotes from Surat Al-A’raf 7:26, which reads, “O ye Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness,- that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition!” Romain goes on to apply the same theological implications from the biblical account to this reference to the “raiment of righteousness.” He writes,

Allah Himself performed the first blood sacrifice ever made in order to provide a clothing of skins that covered the nakedness of Adam (pbuh) and Hawwa. To make this possible, a living being had to die. This innocent animal died in the place of sinners. Through its death, Adam and Hawwa were released from their sin and shame. They got their honor back. They were acquitted of their death sentence. (2013:87)

While his interpretation would seem to harmonize with the biblical text, it can hardly be considered harmonious with the surrounding context or the overall content of the Qur’an. In surah 7, there appears to be nothing in the surrounding context to suggest that the raiment bestowed upon Adam and Hawwa had any sort of substitutionary symbolism or atonement properties, or that it even came from an animal. In fact, in the Qur’anic account of the fall, when Adam and Hawwa realize their mistake and subsequent nakedness, they beg for Allah’s mercy and forgiveness, and the immediate response is to send them down from the heavenly Eden to planet earth as their punishment (Surat Al-A’raf 7:22-25). The text itself merely states that the raiment was given to cover their shame (in some translations, “nakedness”) and to be an adornment. No suggestion is made that the clothing is somehow symbolic of a future substitutionary atonement, for indeed, the Qur’an as a whole denies the possibility of it (Geisler and Saleeb 2002:278, 279). The “clothing of righteousness” (libāsu al-taqwa) is not said to have been given immediately to them; in fact, the conjunction “but” suggests that Allah mentions the clothing of righteousness in contrast to the literal clothing given to them, perhaps a corrective remark as Adam and Eve descend from Paradise to their new home on planet earth in punishment.

Although the Tafsir informs us of the traditional Islamic interpretation rather than the occasion of revelation as mentioned earlier, it is interesting to note that Ibn Kathir’s commentary lists the varying opinions of six other commentators on the garment of righteousness—none of which include any reference to a substitutionary atonement or anything that could have appeased God’s displeasure at Adam and Eve’s sin (2006:544). Indeed, perhaps it is because there is nothing in the text—either surah 7 or the
combined context of the rest of the Qur’an—to suggest this conclusion. While we would agree that the Bible certainly agrees with Romain’s conclusion, it would seem that the Qur’anic text itself does not give enough conclusive evidence to support Romain’s interpretation.

The garment of righteousness in the Qur’an is not referring to substitutionary atonement. Again the question: Is interpreting the Qur’an this way wrong, or is it an insightful new analogy?

Summary and Conclusion

Using the Qur’an as a bridge for reaching Muslims is a decision that many missionaries have chosen to make. While there remains some difference and continued discussion about the extent and style of Qur’anic usage, for those who use it, there are some further questions to ask. In using the Qur’an as a bridge, must Christians subject themselves to its interpretive rules? If they do not, are there potential consequences? Will Muslim converts learn from Christians to take the biblical text at face value, or will they also do eisegesis? Might Adventist materials be dismissed by scholarly Muslims?

Gottfried Oosterwal has made an important contribution to the conversation by his categorization of methods of using the Qur’an (Oosterwal 2005:180-185). The phenomenological method of Qur’anic use, which aims at demonstrating commonalities as bridges between Islam and Christianity, perhaps produces more of an agenda to find those harmonious points of contact rather than a policy to be true to the text itself. At the same time, it is important to note that the phenomenological method has produced many fruitful gospel experiences. On the other hand, utilization of Oosterwal’s Functional-Comparative and Core-Comparative methods leave room for dissonance between the Islamic and biblical text, which gives more space to apply Islamic hermeneutics consistently. Is one better than the other? Might they be used consecutively or in combination to demonstrate the gospel? Will the Christian’s sporadic or inconsistent adherence to a set of hermeneutical rules cause chaos in the minds of our Muslim friends?

The purpose of this paper is not to draw immediate conclusions but merely to raise questions. It has endeavored to show three Islamic hermeneutics that can be overlooked in our efforts to bring our Muslim brothers and sisters to an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It may be worth considering the historical context of each surah that is being utilized, its place in the Qur’an’s chronology, and the actual words and intent of the text. But, at the end of the day, it might be decided that Adventist missiologists are not bound to Islamic hermeneutical rules. If we view the
Qur’anic text as an uninspired historical document with some gleams of general revelation that we would like to pick out and use, and we see no objectionable consequences to slightly adapting the original meaning for our interpretation, then by all means let us plunge forward in the continued production of (mostly) correct applications of the Qur’an.

Notes

1The majority of Islamic scholars seem to side with the thought that Muhammad’s revelations were both localized in origin and extremely universal in application. It is from this presupposition that Shari’a Law can grip its fingers firmly in both 7th century Arabia and the 21st century Muslim state, applying laws and capital punishments that were first instituted hundreds of years ago. Interestingly, a reform movement of “Qur’an-Only” advocates arrived on the hermeneutic scene in the 1890s, intellectual Punjabi Muslims in Northern India, who challenged the use of what they saw as debatable and probably falsified Ahadith. They rejected all external materials and utilized only the Qur’an, convinced that it could be used to interpret itself and that much of the Qur’an’s content was very much localized to the particular event. Although this movement attracted several great intellectual minds well up until the present day—such as Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan), Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (Egypt) and Muhammad Shahrur (Syria), the Qur’an-Only movement has remained a fringe movement, widely considered heretical (Brown 2014:200-202).

Works Cited


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Madelyn Mandell writes under a pen name and has been working in a Muslim country since 2013. She is involved in church work, teaching, and humanitarian aid.
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A Qualitative Analysis of Discipleship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Responses to a Global and Regional Survey

Introduction

In 2014 the South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church commissioned a research team from Avondale College of Higher Education to investigate the nature of discipleship. The aim of the research project was twofold: to provide an objective description of a Seventh-day Adventist disciple of Jesus, and to provide a criterion/criteria by which the attainment of discipleship may be measured and shared in the context of the Adventist Church’s mission. This paper reports on stage one of the project in which international and national church leaders were interviewed regarding their understanding of discipleship as articulated and applied at division, union, conference, and local levels. This qualitative data was then analyzed for common themes, areas for development, and contributions towards a description of a Seventh-day Adventist disciple. Five key findings emerged from stage one and are reported below, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in the Church’s understandings of and approaches to discipleship.

Project Rationale

At the turn of the 21st century, the global SDA Church was yet to corporately articulate a philosophy and theology of ministry that clearly states how disciples are to be made. Furthermore, the church had not yet communicated how the discipleship process works in a global context. To remedy these deficiencies, the General Conference of the SDA Church launched an initiative to prioritize discipleship at local and conference levels (see Conserving “Membership Gains” in General Conference Executive Committee 2007). As noted by Hankinson (2012), this appeal was shared with presidents at the SPD President’s Council, who were asked...
to consider what was needed for implementation at conference and local levels. The Division President’s summation at the time was: “to not make disciples is to not fulfil the gospel commission” (Hankinson 2012:1). As a result, a number of initiatives have evolved around the SPD seeking to implement discipleship programs.

It is of interest that while discipleship is a major focus to Adventists in view of the Great Commission of Matthew 28, the plethora of literature concerning discipleship emanates from Evangelical scholarship other than Adventist scholarship. While several SDA entity websites contain various discipleship programs, content, and seminars, there remains an apparent deficiency in Adventist scholarly research regarding the same. Russell Burrill has spearheaded SDA scholarly work on the theme of discipleship. In the introductory comments in his book, *How to Grow an Adventist Church* (2009), Burrill acknowledges the “vast amount of material that has been written about church growth” (v) from numerous Christian sources but then laments the ongoing inability to contextualize this literature within a Seventh-day Adventist framework. Burrill provides a serious discussion of discipleship within an Adventist context and calls for his church to develop and implement a holistic strategy:

> We do a very good job of getting people onto the membership roles and retaining them in the pew. However, discipleship . . . is deeper than agreeing to twenty-eight cognitive truths and then sitting in a pew for the rest of one’s life. It is a radical commitment of the whole life to the radical Jesus. Jesus’ definition of disciple must form the basis for any discipleship plan your church develops. (2009:102)

The twenty-eight points is a reference to the beliefs of the church and highlights the cognitive focus of believers in the SDA Church (Damsteegt 2011). Burrill therefore appeals to the church to become more engaged in pursuing Jesus Christ in every area of life and ministry and for local churches to develop discipleship plans.

**Materials and Methods**

This study implemented a mixed methodological approach; as stated, this article will only report on the qualitative methodology. Qualitative data was used in order to investigate understandings and practices of discipleship within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In order to gather the data from participants, the researchers decided to utilize individual interviews as these have been shown to be highly useful in obtaining in-depth information regarding individual beliefs, practices, and understandings (Gray 2014:383). This method of data collection needs to be planned well
and implemented with intentional focus. As a result of these parameters, questions used for the interviews were open-ended to encourage open and honest answers (O’Leary 2010:197). Most of the targeted participants were not local and after deliberation the researchers chose to refine the data collection further by conducting telephone interviews.

Although individual telephone interviews add risk to the reliability and validity of the data they also add to the focus of the data on specific items which was the goal of this investigation. This form of data collection was preferable owing to time constraints, reliable communication mediums, travel costs, and access to international and national participants. The use of telephone interviews was good for overcoming bias caused by social characteristics such as dress, race, ethnicity, appearance, etc. (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:439-441).

Some limitations to be noted using this methodology include the need for interviewers to be articulate, good at listening, and clear in their speech (Cohen et al. 2011:439-441). The order of questions needed to be well planned since this can influence the responses, especially questions asked earlier in the interview. The telephone interviews were shortened to between ten and fifteen minutes as they lacked the sensory stimulation of visual or face-to-face interviews (439-441). As a result only the essential questions were included for this research. The risk to reliability and validity was considerable, as the number of items was fewer than in other forms of data collection (439-441).

Table 1. Telephone interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Prompt Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Does your division/administrative context have a working definition of a SDA disciple of Jesus?</td>
<td>What priority does your division place on making disciples? Is there a strategy to make disciples in your division?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How do you measure discipleship in your division/administrative context?</td>
<td>What tools or criteria do you use to measure discipleship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Does your division/administrative context currently use discipleship resources? If so, what are they? If not, do you have plans for this area?</td>
<td>Do you consider children’s ministries including Sabbath School, Pathfinders, etc., to contribute to growing disciples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Do you have any other comments you would like to add about discipleship in your division/administrative context?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The research team developed a process with standardized templates for the initial E-mail contact, telephone interview, follow up E-mail, and final E-mail with the completed transcript. This process introduced the topic, covered the agreement for participation, and prepared the participant for the telephone call and topic. In table 1 are the prepared questions used during the individual telephone interviews.

Once the data was collected it was transcribed using Audacity and then uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Thematic analysis was undertaken by coding the data into emerging themes multiple times. The results are documented below.

**Participants**

As stated above, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide organization structured into international divisions, cross-national unions, state conferences and local churches. Forty-eight international leaders across the Seventh-day Adventist Church divisions and unions were contacted to participate in this study. Twelve agreed to take part. Of the 76 individuals (presidents, SPD departmental leaders, and church pastors) invited to participate, 33 responded affirmatively but only 28 took part in the interview process. Overall 40 participants took part in this study.

**Limitations**

Each research project experiences limitations and for this study there was a limitation on time. This impacted the data collection in a number of ways. Specifically, a contributing factor to our limited qualitative data was the timing of this collection from December 2014 to February 2015. Over this period many individuals were away or on leave, offices were closed over the year-end and this demonstrably contributed to the limited response rate. Two and a half months was a short period of time to conduct the telephone interviews and work around various schedules and international, as well as national time differences. Two individuals conducted the telephone interviews, which could also be viewed as a limitation; however, a procedure was established to ensure that the same process was followed so that the telephone interviews were conducted in a similar manner in an effort to maintain consistency. The telephone interviews were all conducted in English. This was again a limitation for a number of our participants since English was a second or other language. (French was offered as an alternative language, but this was not used during the data collection.) This limitation may have contributed to the small response rate from participants.
Forty out of a potential 126 respondents (31.7%) took part in the telephone interviews. While this is a good response rate overall, the findings of this phase may not be generalizable across SDA Church groups globally. There is, however, the possibility of replicating this study at a later date and comparing the results and findings. Implications and recommendations must therefore take the limited sample size into account. The suggested maximum of 10-15 minutes for each telephone interview meant that the initial establishing of rapport was shortened, as focusing directly on the topic was paramount. This timing limitation also impacted on the number of questions posed, as it was reliant on the participant and their response length to each question. Technology accessibility also presented a limitation, especially in remote areas across the Pacific region. This limitation may also have impacted the participation and response rate.

Finally, SDA church membership consists of both male and female members; a 2013 report indicates that “the church is 57 percent female, and 43 percent male” (Garcia 2013). The respondents in this study were almost exclusively male. Of the 40 participants who took part in this study, one was female. While discussions of gender representation are ongoing in the SDA Church, the issue may be of some relevance when investigating understandings and practices of discipleship. The possibility of gendered perspectives of discipleship may prove a fruitful area for future research.

Results

The mission of the SDA Church is explicit and articulates discipleship as its main focus and priority. This prompts questions regarding individual understandings of the nature of discipleship, its connection to leadership, both locally and to the worldwide church. Of the participants in this study, 39 of 40 provided their own personal definition of an SDA disciple of Jesus. Interestingly, only 57% acknowledged a global SDA definition of discipleship and connected this directly with their position and role in the church mission. A number of these respondents clearly stated that discipleship was their “priority” and constitutes the central “vision” of the SDA Church.

Common themes and phrases used in a definition of discipleship were gathered from the data. The most frequent phrase used characterized a disciple as “a follower of Jesus Christ.” Other phrases used in conjunction with the previous statement included: “in word and practice,” “demonstrating the love of Jesus,” “being involved in evangelism, Bible study and engagement,” “imitate the Master,” “living as Jesus lived,” “to have Jesus living in us,” “in a personal relationship with God,” and “sharing because it is a desire to see God’s kingdom filled . . . with everybody because we
have a belief and an understanding that Christ died for everybody. Not just for the few Seventh-day Adventists.”

An in-depth analysis of respondents’ discipleship definitions revealed four major themes: church health, counter-productive discipleship actions, disciples’ actions, and communication. Each of these themes are addressed by 50% or more of the participants. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Four major themes from the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Church health</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Counter-productive discipleship actions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Disciple’s actions</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-four participants discussed the theme of church health and the role it plays in discipleship. One person reflecting on the state of discipleship articulated the following: When “the church is buzzing . . . then that is an indication that discipleship is taking place. If it is inactive, if there is complaining, if there is no life in the church, I think that is an indication that discipleship needs to be worked on.” The “fruit” of believers, the tone of the church, and believers’ treatment of each other were indications of church health for nine of the participants. The particular nature of the Adventist heritage was addressed by three participants who stated that an appreciation of the past contributed to church health and framed the culture of the SDA Church. Within this theme the aspect of commitment to discipleship was raised as a concern by four of the participants. One was concerned that his church members are not being disciples but “just . . . mere members.” Another described some church members as “semi-active” without a “real commitment.”

The second theme from the data links directly with the theme of church health. Twenty participants clearly identified counter-productive actions that did not contribute to discipleship. Seventeen of the participants described a lack of conversion as leading to a “focus on the pettiness . . . minor stuff.” Three participants differentiated between disciples and members, commenting that a key concern for disciples is evangelism, while “members . . . don’t have any passion in terms of spreading the gospel.” Also acknowledged was “some deficiency in the spiritual habits . . . [some members] attend church but they don’t really participate and get involved in serving as a community.” Another participant felt that some members hold the view that “you’re an Adventist in good and regular standing as long as you’re not doing anything ‘bad’ . . . so there is a very low threshold of what it means to be an Adventist. The last counter-productive action identified in the data was that a church’s focus can be too much “on
the program instead of the spiritual experience and growth of individuals.” Two participants responded that at times the program was the main focus and once the program ends, there was no reason to return to church.

The third major theme identified in the data was that of disciple’s actions where the participants listed 21 actions that disciples are engaged in (see table 3).

**Table 3. Disciple’s actions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active church participation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach others</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time with God</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead others to Jesus</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work in small teams</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outward focus</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurture and support others</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual gifts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review practices</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing experiences</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a toolkit</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pray with and for each other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptisms</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other spiritual habits</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-laborer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding each other accountable</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants contributed to the items on the list above, which is a catalogue of characteristics or practices of SDA disciples of Jesus. Active participation in the life of the church rated the highest number of responses. Specific activities discussed within this field included serving the church and community, participating in church-organized activities other than the worship hour, connecting with fellow Christians, and practicing Jesus’ teachings on how to live as part of the church. One respondent noted that “a disciple comes to listen with attention and intention,” which leads to participation and service.

Teaching also garnered a high number of responses, reflecting the Adventist Church’s strong traditional emphasis on Bible study and training: “Our Sabbath Schools are key discipleship moments. They’re very important like the rest, Social Ministry, Pathfinders—all of that feeds into it, but [the Sabbath School study hour] of course is when we have them
all together and that’s a unique teaching opportunity there that is for the purpose of spiritual [growth].” Bible study was highly correlated with teaching, with a division leader emphasizing: “we keep going back to the Bible and saying that these are the things that Jesus [did] to open peoples’ hearts to prepare the soil—so that we’re not sowing the seed on stony ground—we’re actually sowing it on well prepared ground.”

Worship, prayer, and a strong devotional life all were features of spending time with God. A number of respondents identified this element as primary in the life of a disciple, and acknowledged that this time is key to spiritual growth and a strong relationship with God. Some linked developing spiritual maturity in this way to leading others to Christ: disciples “continually mature, growing in Christ . . . and they [then] have that capacity to be reproduced.” Another interesting action was “work in small teams.” This came through strongly as a key characteristic of discipleship. Disciples are engaged in small groups where they are both mentored and mentor others. This is particularly pertinent for the leaders’ personal experience of discipleship, with one respondent noting: “I’m big on several key individuals that I work with . . . that can then go out and disciple as well. So I have a few that I work with closely. Like right now, I have six individuals that I call on a weekly basis to see how they’re doing, to encourage them.” Another senior church leader describes his experience in the following way: “I call it ‘deeply investing,’ and that is just journeying in life with a handful of people that I intentionally select and share life with . . . It just . . . made sense to me based on how Jesus did his ministry. . . . And I think probably it’s been the approach I’ve taken for, you know, almost 20-25 years of ministry, really. And that is to build a team, to empower a team. Not try to do ministry alone. It’s more fun when you do it together and it’s more biblical in terms of not . . . trying to do ministry all on your own, but doing ministry with other people and seeing that blessing flourish in the ministry God has called them to.”

The intentional, targeted focus on discipleship is varied across the represented divisions. One participant stated that they had “an emphasis on discipleship in all areas of ministry.” Six participants stated that they were encouraging their team to become engaged in ministry as an act of discipleship. One division has intentionally taken steps to disciple their leadership each Thursday. The administrators “study . . . together and then pray for specific mission activities that we are also supporting and implementing and for . . . needs.” This is “not just a regular devotional every day that we have, this is one special weekly meeting lasting for an hour and a half when we are dealing with issues through the small group context.” Another leader indicated that his division was not “really very deliberate in discipleship training.” He felt they had discussed training on
discipleship but had not done anything deliberate about it yet. Additional comments were that discipleship should be taking place “through the departments’ . . . mission activities and everything.”

Further evidence shows that discipleship is being targeted across the worldwide SDA Church context in different ways. One division has implemented Bible reading for all ages as a priority in their churches to enhance discipleship with their members. Another division runs a specific two-year program with their newly baptized members. This program includes an articulated direction, identification of needs in supporting new members in their spiritual growth, and a mentoring program. They “train the leaders as well as all the pastors and then we supervise, we encourage the pastor to lead it in the local church.” Another division is actively including members in their out-reach programs. They are proposing and creating ministries such as media ministry, health ministry, and book evangelism for children, in order “for community and for church members to participate in this ministry and actually to use their special gifts.” The same division is also implementing a “Twelve” ministry where “twelve people in twelve groups . . . are participating in this project. . . . They are very active in such programs.”

Evangelism as a part of discipleship is very strong across the divisions and is a main focus. All participants agreed that their evangelism programs are going well; however, some raised concern as “we have been great on these evangelistic meetings and we have brought people in . . . but I have not seen a lot of people stay because of the connectedness and community that is created through discipleship.” Another leader stated that evangelism has “brought us two big problems now because a lot of people left because . . . [they were] not connected to the church” and “there was no discipleship, . . . no fellowship.”

Eight participants stated that there is no measurement used for discipleship. The remaining 32 were positive that there are measurements for discipleship and provided eight different corporate church measurement tools which are listed in table 4. The common means of measuring discipleship across these divisions relies on statistics where membership and the giving of tithes and offerings are recorded. Other measures used in isolation included the recording of activities: Bible studies conducted, good deeds done, pieces of literature handed out, making new disciples, mission activities, and Sabbath School lesson materials purchased. There does not appear to be a definite articulated tool implemented to measure discipleship. There are instances where visual measurement is used. These visual observations are of the number of people attending activities, noticing individual discipleship growth, seeing membership involvement, and church activity.
Table 4. Current SDA Church discipleship measurement tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement Tool</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baptisms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church membership</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tithes and offerings</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Church Development Survey (NCD)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Church Life Survey (NCLS)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-developed circle tool</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Healthy Is My Church questionnaire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first three items in the table provide the current numbers that are reported and noted for churches, conferences, unions, and divisions. Although these figures provide data on aspects of discipleship, some of the figures may not accurately reflect actual participation. For example, church membership is not seen by the participants as a true reflection as there are names on the church roll where those individuals are no longer attending but the rolls are not updated each year. The reporting of baptisms was viewed positively; however, the attrition of all members was questioned in the interviews including the follow up of new members within the first two years of their church membership. The use of the Natural Church Development (NCD) Survey highlighted church health which was a topic covered by six of the participants and positively by others who are planning to use this in the future. The remaining measurement tools also relate to church health and individual input, with no set church corporate direction being implemented.

A further question on measurement asked participants what they wished could be measured for discipleship. Twenty-one of the participants clearly articulated what they would find helpful in measuring discipleship. Nine participants wished that they could measure the active involvement of church members. Eight participants wished that there were a more combined approach to discipleship linking homes, churches, and schools. Possible means of measuring commitment and activity within the church included regular study of the worldwide quarterly study-pamphlet; and being a mentor or co-laborer was raised by nine participants. A number also stated that a measurement tool that measures “each person’s growing, serving, sharing and worshiping factors” would be of benefit to help people “discover their next step” in discipleship growing.

Twenty-seven of the participants are actively utilizing 93 different discipleship resources. Across the board these resources are varied and are often only used in one or two areas. Interestingly, there are many discipleship-targeted resources available within the Children’s Ministries area;
however, only three participants are aware of these resources or using them. The resource mentioned and used the most consistently is the Sabbath School lesson in a small group setting.

When asked about the resources available for discipleship in their contexts nine of the participants responded. Six participants stated that the Sabbath School Lesson (worldwide quarterly study-pamphlet) was one of the main resources, together with isolated programs including “Walk 2015,” “In Step with Jesus,” “Making Disciples for the Lord,” and the General Conference theme of “Reaching.” Three participants stated that they did not know of any resources specifically being used in their contexts for discipleship.

Clearly articulating, focusing on, and regularly communicating across the global SDA Church was raised as an important issue when promoting discipleship in the SDA Church. This gives rise to the final theme drawn from the data: communication. Twenty-three participants acknowledged that opportunities do exist to communicate between leadership sectors, but reflected that often this does not eventuate. Directives are not always effectively communicated, for example, from the General Conference down through the divisions, unions, and conferences to the churches. An appeal was given by three participants to keep a constant long-term global discipleship message which can be developed in-depth. Six of these participants said they had little opportunity to talk with others across the divisions, unions, and conferences. Five participants wished they had more links with the churches, and six stated that leaders needed to embody and model discipleship before they could communicate and share it within their contexts.

Key Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Five key findings have emerged from the data collected across the international and SPD leadership areas. These key findings are as follows: accurate active church membership, communication, leaders linking personal discipleship to their church employment and role, a need for a corporate approach, and baptism retentions.

Key Finding 1: Need for Accurate (Active)
Church Membership Data

Keeping a record of church membership is one of the measurement tools identified and used in the data. Numerous participants raised the issue of ensuring that this church membership record is accurate and
“active.” These participants felt that the numbers were not indicative of reality. The feelings expressed by individuals revealed that these statistics were irrelevant and did not assist in the measurement of discipleship or in determining a healthy active church. A recommendation would be to have an active church roll which is audited each year showing regular attendance of church members.

Key Finding 2: Communication across Church Entities

The data indicates that there are gaps in the communication between leaders when it comes to understanding, practicing, and implementing discipleship. Further, communication between church leadership and church workers (pastors, ministry leaders, etc.) could be improved. Some of those in church employment are uncertain whether or not a working definition of discipleship exists. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next key finding. There appears to be a limited knowledge and awareness of the measurement tools that are already available for use and being conducted on a regular basis. Or perhaps, there is a problem with the understanding and interpreting of the statistics from these measurement tools. The recommendations would be to disseminate a working definition across the division to ensure that all leaders are aware of the definition and are able to implement it in their own lives as actively employed SDA church members. Church leaders could further communicate various measurement tools in use for all churches within their division. For example, baptisms, tithes, and offerings, church membership, NCD, NCLS, and provide training on how these statistics can assist in helping to understand the discipleship of each SDA Church.

Key Finding 3: Leaders Linking Personal Discipleship to Their Church Employment and Role

While almost all respondents could articulate a personal definition of discipleship, only 55% linked their leadership role in the SDA Church as part of discipleship. This presents a potential disconnect in leaders’ understandings of their leadership role and their personal journey as a disciple of Christ. It would therefore be necessary to ensure that church leaders have a clear understanding of discipleship and how their commitment and role in the purpose and mission of the SDA Church relates to the expectations of their work. The mission of the church is clearly to be and make disciples of Jesus. Being employed as a leader in this faith-based organization would assume that the employee would
function as a committed disciple of Jesus who is endeavoring to continue this commission throughout their work. The definition of an SDA disciple of Jesus clearly states that this commitment takes place in all aspects of an individual’s life, including their employment.

Key Finding 4: Need for a Corporate Approach with Localized Applications

The data has also revealed a need for a more combined and unified presentation. The results and findings already identified in key findings 2 and 3 show that not all leaders are familiar with a working definition for discipleship or the connection this has to their leadership roles. There are multiple and varied resources available; however, few of the international leaders are aware of these or know where to obtain them. Many participants have created their own resources or sourced them through the Internet. Combining some sort of resource listing would be of benefit to the Adventist Church as a whole. A targeted approach clearly defining a definition with an outline of the roles and expectations is needed across the worldwide church. The apparent “silo” approaches, although going well and contributing to discipleship, need to be shared and spread across the divisions. An important resource to highlight and disseminate to all leaders is the fact that the world-wide SDA Church invests in people as resources, for example, leadership roles, etc., and shares a Sabbath School lesson across nations and languages. As discipleship is the core mission of the SDA Church, there is a need to instill this so as to assist those in areas where this is not happening intentionally.

Key Finding 5: Baptism Retentions

It is clear that evangelism is a strong focus of the mission of the SDA Church. A record of baptisms is used as a measurement tool for making new disciples. Making new disciples is part of the mission of the SDA Church. The findings show that the baptism numbers are growing but concern was raised over these new disciples and whether they were still active members at their second year of discipleship. Perhaps a more targeted approach needs to be taken to the retention of members and their discipleship. One church had implemented a mentor program and another was using the concept of co-laborers. A troubling concern raised under this topic throughout our study was the “real conversion” or commitment of the members and their personal relationship with God.
Conclusion

From these key findings it is evident that a fully articulated definition of a SDA disciple of Jesus is needed for all SDA church members and leaders. Such a definition will be developed in the next stage of this research project, followed by the development of a personal discipleship measurement tool. This initial stage of data collection, however, has highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in the Adventist Church’s understandings of and approaches to discipleship, and invites comparative analyses from other global denominational entities.

Notes

1 From a population of almost 37 million people, the South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church has approximately 423,000 members in nearly 2,000 churches throughout Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific island nations. Of these members, over 80% live in Papua New Guinea and islands throughout the South Pacific Ocean (‘South Pacific’, 2016). The SPD has four Unions: the Australian Union Conference, New Zealand Pacific Union Conference, Papua New Guinea Union Mission, and Trans-Pacific Union Mission.

Works Cited


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'Now he had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4 NIV)

The disciples were walking the hot, dusty road back from that evil, heathen city. Well, it wasn’t all that evil or heathen when they were hungry a few moments earlier. Opinions do tend to change with the circumstances. “O God, I’m so glad to get out of that place. It makes me uncomfortable!”

You must understand, Jews had a problem with Samaritans. They weren’t pure-blooded Jews. They didn’t come from the same background. They didn’t worship quite the same. They just weren’t similar in many ways at all! Jewish disdain was so intense toward the Samaritans that in order to travel from Judea to Galilee or vice versa, they would travel at 90-degree angles rather than take the direct route through Samaria.

And while they wouldn’t say so in his presence, they already had a problem with Jesus on this particular day. “Why do we have to go through Samaria? You know we don’t want to go through enemy territory any more than they want us to go through there. We really don’t mind taking the long way home. But whatever you do—please, don’t go there!”

The disciples were taking Jesus food that they bought in the nearby Samaritan village. “Let’s just take him this food so we can get outta here.” As they approach Jesus, they can’t believe their eyes. Not only is he talking to a Samaritan, he’s talking to a Samaritan woman. Jewish literature spoke against such improper behavior; so why is he doing this?

Homiletics so often focus on the dialogue between Jesus and the
woman. But the more I study this story, the more I like what is about to take place when the disciples arrive on the scene. They know nothing about the conversation. They are only to initially know that these upcoming events are about to turn their world upside down.

The conversation ends a little later, and the woman returns to her community. They had no reason to think they would ever see her again; but lo and behold, she’s back—accompanied by a whole lot of other Samaritans. The disciples reasoned among themselves, “Perhaps he’ll answer some questions and bless a few of them. Then we’ll be on our way.” Next thing they know, they’re getting an all-expenses-paid, two-day stay in a lovely Samaritan village.

This is where their lesson continued, and where our instruction starts.

**Why Did They Have to Go There?**

Reflecting many decades later upon that day, John writes that Jesus and the disciples had to go through Samaria. Why? I’m not so sure that this story was simply about Jesus and a Samaritan woman, or about a Samaritan woman and her past, or about what constitutes true worship, or about anything else either you or I have heard about the events recorded in John 4. The real focus of this chapter was the mindset of the Twelve. The real question for the disciples was, “How will you ever be able to go to—and minister to—Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, if you don’t care about all of these?”

The disciples had to go through Samaria because they needed to be cured of their bigotry. Bigotry can be defined as “extreme intolerance of any creed, belief, or opinion that differs from one’s own” (Webster’s Universal College Dictionary 1997:76). I also suggest that bigotry is characterized by being intolerant of or indifferent toward anyone whom we perceive to be different from us. Bigotry is not the exclusive domain of one race or one class. Anyone can be guilty of bigotry. Bigotry is best recognized when someone participates in stereotyping.

Look at the history behind the story of our text. Mixed bloodlines from hundreds of years back created an inferior race of people. Or so the average Jew thought. Their worship styles were different than those of the Jews. Their entire worldview was separate and distinct, each from the other. Whose was preferable? Their own, of course! And what was most important? “Jesus is one of us. He relates better with our kind than with yours!”

I believe Jesus decided early that morning, while he was communing with his heavenly Father, that he and his disciples had to go through Samaria. They had to do it because his disciples needed to see the prejudices
that had taken residence deep within their hearts. Jesus knew that the only way his followers would learn to stop stereotyping—the only way that they could be cured of their deep-seated bigotry—was to spend time with those despised Samaritans. Spending time with them would explode those stereotypes. Spending time with them would help them to see that the things they had in common far outnumbered the things they did not have in common. Perhaps most of all, spending time with them would help his disciples to see that in so many ways those Samaritans actually had a better understanding of God than they themselves did.


I wonder how many of us need to leave our Jerusalem and spend some time in Samaria. I wonder how many of us need to stop trying to take the long way home, in an effort to avoid Samaria, and just go ahead and come face to face with those Samaritans. I believe that when we take the time to walk with them, to talk with them, to eat with them, that we will discover that they are just like we are.

The work of mission—of fulfilling the Gospel commission in areas that are not like our own—requires a different mindset. It requires the mind of Christ. He left his home in glory, took on a human body, lived in the squalor called earth, became one with us—so he could lift us up and give us a clearer view of God; so we could experience all that heaven has to offer to us. It doesn’t mean that we accept the belief systems of others. But it does mean that we take the time to understand why others believe as they believe and see life as they see it.

I believe that Jesus had to go through Samaria because his disciples needed to see that he saw the best in everyone. When Jesus revealed to the Samaritan woman that he knew about her past, she sensed no spirit of condemnation. Had she sensed a critical spirit, do you think she would have so excitedly dropped that water jar, run back to the city, and invited a bunch of men she had known for some time to come and spend time with Jesus?

What a difference the Church of God, the Body of Christ, would make in communities worldwide if its members saw the best in everyone! What a difference we would make if we, like Jesus, focused on similarities and not differences; if we focused on people and not reputations or perceptions. Somewhere beneath those hardened rough exteriors that we allow to scare us away from coming close to others lies a heart that yearns for something better. I am convinced that when Bible writers refer to humans as the “apple of God’s eye,” what they are really saying is that, no matter
how defaced the image of God might be in each of us, we still have been made in his image, and there is something of that image that is still visible and evident in each of us. Our job as brothers and sisters in Christ is to look for that image of Divinity within all men, women, boys, and girls.

Last but not least, I believe that Jesus had to go through Samaria because his disciples needed to see that the Gospel is for everyone. Everyone is worthy to receive God’s grace. And remember that worthiness is determined not by who we are but by what we need. And what we all need is the power of the Gospel!

Those Twelve needed to know that they couldn’t afford to be afraid to get their hands dirty. They could only be apostles if they were willing to be with the people, to spend time with the people.

**Conclusion**

You and I have to go through Samaria. Perhaps those who live there haven’t washed their clothes in a while. Perhaps they curse like the proverbial sailor. Perhaps they have defiling habits. Jesus is our Model. He who sat on high came down low to spend time with us. And he saw that our spirituals garments were in need of washing, heard that our mouths were filled with cursing and other foulness, and noticed that our habits were so filthy that angels would have looked away had it not been for the divine command to keep an eye on us so Satan wouldn’t destroy us!

I am convinced that there’s a two-way blessing in going through Samaria. We think we are going there to bless them. The real blessing that God has is for us! It may be that God wishes to reveal himself more fully to us through those same Samaritans that we wish to avoid. Let our desire be, “Please, let’s go there!”

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ALEXA SHARMA

A Ministry Response to Demonic Harassment and Possession among Contemporary Hindus

Introduction

Our family has witnessed many people in India plagued with strange diseases, mental illnesses, and unexplainable relational strife. We have often listened as the people discuss among themselves: “Are we cursed? Is the boori atma [evil spirit] to blame?” There are uncountable Hindu resources for an Indian who wishes to prevent or treat these kinds of conditions. However, though symptoms sometimes lessen after the application of pujas, mantras and reverse-cursing, only through Jesus Christ can the power of Satan be completely broken.

This article deals briefly with how demonic involvement in a Hindu person’s life might be discerned by a Christian worker. Next, a twofold approach to Christian ministry dealing with spiritual harassment is explored: (1) to help demonically oppressed non-believers attain freedom through their fully informed decision to align themselves with Christ, and (2) to disciple new believers so they can maintain their freedom through continual alignment with Christ. This article will not deal extensively with Hindu demonology/theology/occult practices, nor will it explore Hindu methods for dealing with these types of problems.

Indications of Demonic Harassment/Possession

How does a Christian worker know that a person is demonized? I have found that when a Christian worker is specifically invited by a Hindu person to help them with harassment issues, the affected person or his or her family will openly say that they are harassed or cursed, especially
if the worker maintains an open, understanding attitude about such issues; that is, does not infer that such ideas are superstitious. I believe it is important to maintain openness in spiritual conversations, but to hold back on dealing with demons in people’s lives until invited—either by the person, their family, or the Holy Spirit. This is because, while there is such a thing as unwanted possession, there is also desired possession, in the Hindu context. This might be due to the perceived source (Hindu god or demi-god vs. demon) or because the person is seeking power from a demonic source.

Some indications of demonic involvement in a Hindu person’s life include illness that does not seem to have any natural cause or cure, depression, sudden onset of anxiety or sadness (either when in a certain place or in general), “gifts” or abilities acquired by a person from a non-biblical satanic source (such as future-telling), nightmares or visions, strange behavior, distractedness or sickness at critical ministry moments, and strange consistent strings of bad luck and relational problems for a person or family. This is not an extensive list, but these are some indicators of demonic involvement (Vanderkooi 1985:197 contains a helpful list of possible “symptoms” of demonization).

Finally and most importantly is to recognize that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given as a tool for the church is discernment of spirits. Anytime Christian workers are potentially dealing with demonization they can pray and ask God to reveal whether a person’s problems are spiritual in nature and then trust him to give the spiritual gift of discernment when needed. In this way Christians can learn to notice people or problems that seem paranormal without feeling paranoid or fearful, then take the impressions to the Lord in prayer for confirmation.

Ministry Responses to Demonized People

What are some of the ministry responses that can be utilized in helping demonized people find freedom in Jesus Christ? One of the best ways to answer this question is to share case studies illustrating actual cases particularly how the difficult-to-define gift of discernment from the Holy Spirit can assist in setting people free in a Hindu context.

Case Study 1

One morning, as I was praying, I invited God to consider me his ambassador for the day. I had never prayed this before, but had recently read about asking God to send us on missions for him. When I finished praying, my husband said, “I think you should visit Puja today.” Immediately,
I knew in my heart that he was right—that was God’s mission for me. The Holy Spirit first used my husband, and then my own feeling of peace, to show me the first step in his plan for me that day.

I rode my bicycle the 1.5 hours to Puja’s home. For about half the trip, I was reviewing an encounter we had had with a family whose son is possessed. I prayed over the situation and thought of what I might do differently next time. I rejoiced over our authority over evil spiritual powers in the name of Jesus. Then, I thought, “These are pretty heavy thoughts to think all morning . . . I should sing!” The rest of my ride down the mountain road was spent singing praises to Jesus.

When I arrived at Puja’s home, I found her in good spirits. We chatted, and I prayed for her, all the while wondering why God had sent me—she wasn’t particularly in need, nor particularly receptive. I gave her a Bible anyway, as the opportunity presented itself, and went upstairs to visit her in-laws.

As soon as I entered the room, I noticed a woman I hadn’t seen before, with a rather strange posture/expression. The family was sitting around her, and they seemed worried. It turns out, she was the once-missing wife of Puja’s brother-in-law. She had returned some weeks previous.

“I feel so strange when I take this medicine,” she said, rubbing her forehead. I asked what medicine she had taken—perfectly polite conversation in rural India! However, her father-in-law stared at me intensely for several moments. I wondered if it was somehow impolite to ask in this situation, and tried to backtrack. Finally, he said, “You don’t know anything about this kind of medicine . . . this is medicine for the mind. But if you know the cure for her problem, I want you to tell it to me!”

The family described the woman’s erratic behavior. I had the “feeling” or “impression” that she was possessed—she once stayed up for 40 hours straight, just wandering around the village. Even her current posture seemed to say she was not her normal self. I told the family that I didn’t have a cure, but I know One who does. We all bowed our heads and I asked the God of Heaven to give me wisdom, discernment, and protection.

After praying, we did a brief Bible study on the Gerasene demoniac. I talked to the young woman and somewhat awkwardly ordered the demon I assumed was there to stay quiet unless I said it could speak. Then I asked it to tell what it was.

After talking for a while about other possibilities, the woman explained that she had a spirit that could tell the future. Apparently, that very morning she had told her husband, “Alexa is coming.” When asked which Alexa, she responded, “The Singing Alexa.” This confirmed a demonic “prophetic gift” involvement to me, although I didn’t confirm what she said, because I didn’t want to give any kudos to a demon.
I prayed again for wisdom and then we talked some more. The family wanted to know a diagnosis. I hesitated, but finally said I thought she was possessed. The family all nodded—a Hindu priest had told them the same thing the day before. It was then that I noticed the woman was wearing red threads on her wrists. The family confirmed this was a “treatment,” although I would only learn later it was not intended to be a cure but a kind of binding agent to keep the evil spirit from spreading.

I asked the family if they were willing to remove the bands and ask only Jesus to cure the problem. They said they would attempt this in one month’s time—but before the month was out, the woman had taken her young son and disappeared again.

This case study is just one example of the way that psychological and physiological signs of oppression and the discernment of the Holy Spirit work together in helping workers diagnose spiritual issues.

Ministry Response to Oppressed Non-Believers

Trust Before Truth

Whether bathing in the Ganges to cleanse sin or trying various doctors to cure disease, cause and effect are not as important in solving distressing personal problems as locating the cure in a veritable “haystack” of possibilities. This perhaps stems from the inability of a person to truly know what causes misfortune—karma, dharma, occult power, personal choice—all these can work together to “cause” problems, and the correct manipulation of circumstances and powers will, hopefully, bring the sought-after solution (see also Fuller 2004:74, 75). The reason why a solution occurred is either unknowable or irrelevant. Most “cures” consist of special knowledge held by doctors or spiritual practitioners. Because truth is not immediately relevant in the Hindu’s search for spiritual freedom, trust building must be the Christian worker’s first step in ministry.

Trust-building is also important because the high cost of following Jesus and the Hindu value of tolerance towards other views often makes truth particularly offensive. The high-caste people we work with have not only their reputations but often their livelihood at stake in renouncing idolatry. I believe that some understanding of the truth about idols and fallen angels makes the issue of allegiance clear—and loyalty to the true God would be enough to cause some sincere Hindus to follow Jesus. But the truth about the Hindu pantheon is not only insulting, it can cause the messenger to seem uninformed and intolerant, which can further shut the door of opportunity for witness. Therefore, workers must pray for trust to be built between them and the oppressed. They must actively build that
trust through spending time with people, and must be sensitive to the spirit’s prompting on the right time for sharing truth.

Proclamation of Truth

As alluded to, a Hindu who hears of the power of Christ or that Christians can cast out Satan will initially see Jesus’ participation as one of a series of spiritual medications that may or may not work. In our personal experience with interests and in conversations with local pastors, the initial request for healing from Christ or by a Christians is seen as one of many options, which are often being sought concurrently. A person with this kind of mindset will not immediately realize the necessity or even the reasoning behind asking only Jesus for help—a critical point, since our jealous and holy God of truth does not want people to misunderstand the source of his power and healing (Isa 42:8). But a person in a Hindu community will not usually be willing to consider the necessity of submitting to biblical truth or the exclusive claims of allegiance to Christ as a prerequisite to finding freedom from demonization.

Case Study 2

Chayana’s adult son is mentally unwell. As a young child, he was intelligent, funny, and caring. But at some point he changed, becoming both violent and mentally childlike. Although Chayana says she thinks he suffered a brain injury when hit by his third grade teacher, she really believes he was cursed by a jealous relative who could have no children.

Chayana often spoke with us about her son, wondering aloud what she must have done in a past life to deserve such punishment from God. We listened with compassion, but it wasn’t until we met her son Rajiv that we had any idea that we could or should help her.

One evening, as we visited with Chayana and her younger son, Rajiv walked into the room. He was very childlike, obviously wanting to please his rather embarrassed mother. Heavy psychoactive drugs had left him drooling, to top off his other strange behavior. A feeling of intense, heavy compassion settled on my heart. It would not leave me, even when we went home. My husband, Christian, and I prayed: Could it be that God wanted to heal Rajiv? We prayed for confirmation.

Several weeks later, a supporter of our teammates wrote to the Singh's to tell them they were praying for Rajiv. They had read a short article about him, and were so convicted he would be healed that they had been praying many times a day for that very outcome.

We called a fast, gave Chayana a Hindi New Testament to read to build
her faith, and let our supporters know of our intentions: we would ask God to set Rajiv free!

After three days of fasting and prayer, our home was palpably peaceful. Chayana’s family entered on a Friday evening, just after we had welcomed the Sabbath. The children were tucked away in their beds, presumably with angels of light to guard them as we had requested!

Christian read one of the stories of Jesus casting out a demon, although Chayana said that was definitely NOT her son’s problem. We then laid hands on Rajiv and prayed in the name of Jesus for his healing. At that moment, both Christian and I felt our hands and arms tingle as though they had fallen asleep.

However, there was no change in Rajiv. We spent more time in prayer, singing, and reading, but nothing changed. Perhaps God will heal him in the night, we reasoned. Still feeling peaceful, we ended our “deliverance” session and had dinner!

God did not heal Rajiv in the night. However, as we prayed and talked together, Christian and I realized that something was different about Chayana that night: on her forehead she had the tilak, a sign that she had been to the temple on the way to our home!

Realizing that God would not share his glory with another god or religious system, we had an open conversation with Chayana and her younger son about asking only Jesus for healing—about being willing to follow Jesus and only Jesus if her son were healed. Christian explained, clearly and simply, the message of the Great War over our souls written about in the Bible.

The family were not offended—but they could not accept the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. “My poor son,” said Chayana. “It’s just too high a price to pay for his healing. What would our neighbors say about us if we did not have the devta (village god) stop at our home during festivals?”

I believe Chayana and her younger son are currently weighing the cost. We continue to pray that they will give Christ the chance to give them freedom.

Sharing Truth

After trust-building, the actual sharing of truth must be one of the first aspects of ministry to those affected by curses. Neil Anderson and Dave Park sees any direct encounter with demons as essentially a truth encounter, rather than a power encounter:

It isn’t power per se that sets the captive free; it’s truth (John 8:32). The power of the Christian is in the truth; the power of Satan is in the lie.
Satan fears detection more than anything else. Whenever the light of truth comes on, he and his demons, like cockroaches, head for the shadows. (2001:118)

The only offensive weapon in the list of the armor of God is his word (Eph 6:17 for God’s word is truth (John 17:17). The Greek for “word” in this passage is rhema, meaning the “spoken word” of God. The truth, however slowly, carefully, and sensitively it needs to be proclaimed, must be proclaimed. At first, this may involve only explaining that the person must remove any objects (talismans) previously applied by another spiritual practitioner. It should certainly involve the invitation to seek healing only from Jesus, and possibly an explanation to the family of the need to be willing to allow the oppressed person to follow Jesus exclusively after healing takes place. People must know that they can gain freedom in Jesus Christ, but also that he will not share the space of their hearts nor their devotion with any other god. They should be allowed to count the potential cost of following Jesus before making a decision. If a person is not at least willing to give up the strongman that is afflicting them, the evil spirits cannot be bound and expelled (personal conversations with Pastor Malik from the Sainj Adventist Church). If initial, small attempts to share truth are rejected, the person is not ready for the freedom that Jesus can give. The solution is to keep praying and wait.

At some point in the process of seeking and receiving healing, people must be taught, using the biblical stories, where curses, and sheitan (Satan), and even the devta (village demi-gods) and bhagvan (traditional gods and goddesses of Hinduism) come from. Without understanding this, there will be no real reason to avoid the worship of other gods.

Asking in Faith

Once a person has learned enough about Jesus and his power to set them free, the person should be invited to decide if they are willing to follow Jesus. If a person is willing, verbal prayer in the name of Jesus will destroy any curse or other form of demonic harassment (Vanderkooi 1985:197). Fasting and prayer (Matt 17:21) are helpful before the event. There also may need to be more than one prayer/ministry session. Any lie a person believes entwines itself in the person’s hearts. It takes time to destroy all the roots of such lies. However, we have observed that even as the roots are being destroyed, those who are on this path are able to experience the peace of God through prayer even before all demonic involvement in their life is completely destroyed.

I have listed the steps needed to minister to an oppressed person. Space
constraints do not allow us to emphasize enough that these situations must be handled with all the tact, finesse, intercession of the Holy Spirit, backup prayer and outright Christian love for the oppressed as possible. It is a sensitive issue and many Indians think of themselves as a sensitive people. But Christians can be bold in their invitation to freedom because the power and love of Christ is on their side. The next section looks at how Indian Christians can maintain their freedom in Christ.

**Ministry Response to Christians Affected by Harassment**

Satan also seeks to gain access, whether rightful or not, to Christians in order to make them ineffective, to turn them back to Hinduism, or to annoy and hurt them. However, a person staying close to Jesus’ side is protected by his power. It is important to help new believers feed and clothe themselves spiritually through prayer and Bible study, but missionaries and church workers should also teach them how freedom from demonic harassment can be maintained and regained by staying bhakt, or devoted, to Christ.

**Maintaining Freedom**

New believers must be taught to confess and renounce known sin. Just after the story of Balaam’s inability to curse Israel is the heartbreaking tale of Israel cursing herself (Num 25; Rev 2:14). Balaam led Israel into the sins of idolatry and adultery, which removed them out from the protective power of Jehovah and rendered them accursed. Therefore, it is not enough to help people find freedom from evil spirits, but they must be taught to lean on Christ for daily victory against cultural practices that the Bible calls sin.

**Idolatry**

Many former Hindus face a lot of pressure to continue to show devotion to family or village gods in order to please the extended family. Family members traditionally honor the family god/idol by performing pranam, or Namaste, meaning “I salute the god within you.” Families watch to see if converted members will still perform this oblation. This action is seen by some in the missiological community as being harmless if the heart remains unbowed. Missionaries from another denomination explained to us that their standard practice is to encourage new Yeshu Bhaktas (Jesus devotees) to continue pranam to idols and eating of prasad (food offered to idols) in the home, in order to honor their father and mother, while
staying true to God through internal thoughts and intentions. We do not know at this point how widespread this opinion is. However, in reading the Hindi New Testament (OVV) concerning Christ’s temptations in the wilderness, all Satan would have required of Christ was a simple pranam in order to give him the entire world. Christ resisted this temptation as our model and our propitiation. For us to not encourage a similar response seems to go against biblical principles.

Food Offered to Idols

Eating prasad in order to avoid offending others is also a temptation for converts. Prasad includes food offered to idols, and eating it brings the special power and grace of the represented deity to anyone who eats it (Fuller 2004:74, 75.). The apostle Paul gives clear instructions on this subject: If we know something is prasad, we are not to partake. Gentiles are not required to follow all the letter of the law, but eating food offered to idols is one of only three prohibitions given to gentile converts in Acts 15:29. At the Sainj Adventist Church numerous people have found freedom from demonic possession or harassment, only to suffer worse harassment after choosing to eat prasad. This reminds us of the story Jesus told of the demon who brought his friends to inhabit his old, empty home in Matt 12:45: “And the last state of that man was worse than the first.”

While stressing the importance of not opening doors to Satan, it is also important to careful not to give even the slightest impression that demons are more powerful than Jesus. We must constantly strive to model emotional freedom in Christ, and should not be overly focused on the demonic in ministry. Joshua Raj points out that many Indian Christians’ fear of malevolent Hindu gods is replaced by fear of demons because some Christian denominations constantly teach and stress topics on spiritual warfare (2008:128). Our teaching should be balanced and our focus should be on Jesus.

Regaining Freedom

Fasting and prayer provide spiritual space to gain wisdom for spiritual conflict. Prayer walks are helpful, so my husband or I, or both of us, take some time to “cleanse” our home spiritually. If it seems the atmosphere in our home is growing dark, our family comes together to repent of sin, to realign ourselves with Christ, and to seek his presence in us and in our home. After an initial prayer in this manner, we walk around the house and pray at each bedroom for the person who stays in that room. We pray for community members when in our living room and kitchen. We pray
that everything we do in each room would only bring God glory, and if we are convicted of sin, we repent. We may sing or quote Scripture as seems appropriate. By singing and praying throughout our home—using the “sword of God,” the spoken word of God—we have seen attacks halted. A new believer lived with us for several months and witnessed our actions and God’s response when we faced spiritual attack. She also began to use to good effect these simple yet powerful tools: prayer, confession, faith, and singing (for more information see Ferris 1990b).

Curses can and should be renounced verbally by those following Christ. A missionary who says a Christian “can’t be cursed” and leaves it at that is leaving the new Christian open to the temptation to go to another practitioner to solve the problem. Instead, the power of God should be invoked to break the curse and in prayer the blessing, protection, and power of God should be requested for the new believer. If there are physical objects associated with the curse, such as idols or talismans, they should be destroyed. Always invite Jesus to take hold of the person or space. This can be done in a simple, joyful ceremony or in personal devotions. The verbal aligning of self with Christ will send Satan’s hosts running (Jas 4:7). Demonic powers may seek to find doorways into the life through sin or curses, but demons are easily stopped by the same power which raised Jesus from the dead and now works within believers (Eph 1:1-23; see also Ferris 1990a). God’s people must know, model, and teach about this power to the baby Christians who are just beginning their walk with God.

Objections

I realize that the idea of telling a Hindu his or her god is a demon is very offensive. In this particular instance, we are assuming the missionary is dealing with people who are asking for help. A Hindu who tells you he or someone he cares for is being spiritually oppressed or cursed and asks for help will by necessity have a degree of trust in you, as well as a certain degree of desperation to be willing to ask. The statement that truth should be a part of this kind of ministry is not to negate the importance of “speaking the truth in love.”

Conclusion

Case Study 3

I will conclude with one additional story from our ministry in India: The powerful testimony of one of the most powerless persons in an Indian home, the daughter-in-law.
Radika is a new believer who has stayed in our home for several months during her journey to know Jesus. As a new bahu (daughter-in-law), she knew her family would require her to participate in many rituals and festivals which would not please her Heavenly Father. She also knew that because her Hindu family does not see any essential difference between her Christianity and their religious beliefs, she would be watched to make sure she would still act as a member of the family and community. Failure could mean rejection and abandonment—at best only emotional abandonment, at worst, physical abandonment.

While in our home, Radika was convicted that she should not take prassad, meaning food offered to idols, nor accept any Hindu good luck charms or talismans. She also felt it would be inappropriate to keep pictures of Hindu gods in her bedroom. She was determined to honor her Heavenly Father, but worried she would be rejected by her in-laws if she made too much of a scene over these things. So, she prayed.

Radika has, through the help of the Holy Spirit, found a creative way to handle each of these “tests of her faith” she has had to face. Removing the idols from her room was a cinch—she just put other things on the walls, and breathed a sigh of relief when her father-in-law approved of her decoring. Although she has explained her need to refrain from certain activities to her family, and although they are accepting of her faith, they still expect her to partake in other activities to show she is a part of the family. When offered prassad in the home, Radika ties the food in a corner of her scarf to feed the dogs later. Once, when she knew she would be forced to go to the temple, she fasted on that day so she could, like Naaman of old, accompany her family into the temple without displeasing her Heavenly Father. She has quietly destroyed any items supposed to bless her with fertility, and hopes to show her actions more openly once her Heavenly Father blesses her and her husband with a child.

Finally, one evening, Radika faced a truly difficult trial. She was partaking in a festival called karva brat, a time when women fast for the good health and longevity of their husbands. Radika chose to participate, and to pray to Jesus for her husband’s prosperity in a special way on that day. However, at the end of the festival, the moon god is worshipped, while all the family members look on.

I can tell you that Radika’s lips were often moving in prayer to God that day. When it came time to pour out a drink offering to the moon god, Radika turned aside from the moon and poured the water to the ground in front of the dark night sky, audibly committing the offering to the one true God.

Although Radika faces many trials and difficulties because of her steadfast love of Christ, He has provided creative ways for her to honor
her family while honoring her God as well. Before choosing to follow Jesus, Radika sometimes felt the power of the evil one coming over her in the night, to strangle her. Now, though her mind is at times perplexed with temporal problems, she is free from demonic harassment. The name of Jesus has set her free.

Missionaries and ministers among Hindus will, as they gain the trust of the people, witness demonic harassment and possession in their communities. By leaning on the discernment gift of the Holy Spirit they will learn to discern when particular problems are of demonic origin. The work of God’s ambassadors in these situations is twofold. They must lead demonically oppressed non-believers to attain freedom through their fully informed decision to align themselves with Christ, and they must disciple new believers to maintain their freedom through continual alignment with Christ.

Works Cited


Alexa Sharma has been a missionary to a Hindu nation with Adventist Frontier Missions since 2010, along with her husband Christian, and their two children. The Sharma family serve undercover in an area hostile to mission work. They have found in friendship evangelism the chance to understand the deepest heart issues of high caste Hindu people and to believe wholeheartedly in God’s perfect strategy to reach the so-called unreachable.
The Meaning of the City: An Urban Missional Approach to the Use of City Imagery in Revelation

Introduction

“Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication’” (Rev 14:8 NRSV).

At the heart of the second angel’s message is the term Babylon and its prophetic interpretation. In Rev 14:8, the word Babylon is introduced in John’s Apocalypse and reoccurs five more times in the subsequent chapters (16:19, 17:5, 18:2, 10, 21).

Although the subject of Babylon may be approached in distinctive ways (i.e., history, archeology, or eschatology), in the book of Revelation it plays a significant role as it uncovers the climax of human history. Besides all other cities cited in the book of Revelation—such as the seven city churches to which the book is addressed (Rev 1:4; 2; 3)—Babylon and the New Jerusalem have a vital role in the unfolding of humankind’s final destiny. Beasley-Murray says, “Revelation as a whole may be characterized as A Tale of Two Cities” with the sub-title, The Harlot and the Bride” (1974:315; emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, the main focus of this article goes beyond the possible prophetic interpretations of the term Babylon. Instead this article focuses on the fact that from all the available images that could have been used to expose the control of the evil power, God chose a city. What are the connections between the use of the city as a symbol, and the tension portrayed between the Mother of Harlots (Rev 17:5) and the Bride (Rev 21:2)? What are some of the implications of this relationship and the urban mission of the church? The purpose of this article is, as Redford asserts, “to read
Scripture with a missional perspective” (2012:234) by examining the relationship between the use of the city imagery in the book of Revelation and some of its implications to urban missiology.

The Meaning of the City

Cities are not a contemporary phenomenon. From the beginning of human history a city became a way to protect and create solutions to the most pressing felt needs of the very first generations (Keller 2012:136; Murray 1990:21). According to the biblical narrative, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from the garden, their son Cain established a town, thus becoming the first builder of a city.

There are, however, different ideas regarding the very existence of cities. Were they planned and intended by God before the creation of mankind? Or were they merely human creations?

The Conceptualization of the City

In the search to fully understand the origin and the concepts behind the existence of the city some crucial questions arise. What is a city? How did it start in first place? What purposes does it fulfill? What processes does it develop? How can it in fact be defined? Lewis Mumford points out:

No single definition will apply to all its manifestations and no single description will cover all its transformations, from the embryonic social nucleus to the complex forms of its maturity and the corporeal disintegration of its old age. The origins of the cities are obscure, a large part of its past buried or effaced beyond recovery, and its further prospects are difficult to weigh. (1961:3)

We could partly agree with Mumford’s declaration when he affirms that no single definition applies to the city. However, this is not the case regarding the origin of the city. There are at least two main propositions about the conceptualization of the city.

On the one hand, there are those who believe that God intentionally designed the city. Urban missiologists Raymond Bakke (1987), Harvie Conn (1987), and Manuel Ortiz (2001), for instance, believe that it was God’s purpose to gather his creation in communities that would further develop into an urbanized world. Floyd McClung defends the same concept: “God planned the cities. We can know with certainty that He wanted us to gather in city-communities because He created us for togetherness” (1991:63). This thought mainly comes from God’s mandate
to the first couple: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). Greenway and Monsma go even further by supporting the idea that this cultural mandate “implied, even required, city building” (2000:3). John Dawson, in turn, affirms that “cities have the mark of God’s sovereign purpose upon them” (2002:19). These facts are thus presented as biblical frames of reference for understanding that cites were part of God’s ideal for humanity.

The second position, on the other hand, adopts the view that the city was entirely a human conception, marked by sinful and selfish attitudes. This view is grounded in the fact that Cain—the world’s first murderer—was the founder the world’s first city. Cain is described as “a perversely impenitent individual whose life, wholly and hopelessly dedicated to evil, [was] spent in defiance of God” (Nichol 1989:242). Cain’s attitude somehow demonstrates what was behind his decision to build the first city. Among scholars who hold this view, French sociologist Jacques Ellul, points out that Cain’s decision to build the first city, affirms that “for God’s Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself—just as he substitutes his own security for God’s. Such is the act by which Cain takes his destiny on his own shoulders, refusing the hand of God in his life” (2011:5).

Another noteworthy aspect supporting this view is the meaning of the name given to the city built by Cain: Enoch, which means “initiation” or “dedication” (chanakh: to dedicate, inaugurate, initiate). Most probably, Cain’s decision was centered in his purpose to create a city in contrast to the Garden of Eden. The city Cain named after his son indicated his intention on living his life on his own terms, as he pleased. Therefore, the city of Enoch was built as the initiation of a new beginning to Cain’s life, in opposition to God’s creation. This attitude widened and enlarged the gap between Cain and God in his search for solutions to the problems he had created (Ellul 2011:6).

The context of Gen 4:17, nonetheless, suggests that building a city was a further act of insubordination, insolence, and incredulity (Murray 1990:24). Through this action, Cain demonstrated that he was not comfortable with God’s assurance of protection placed upon him (Gen 4:15), so he built a very visible place of refuge for himself. The future Cain had in mind was connected with the city he was building, a concrete symbol of self-reliance and ultimate independency from God.

At a time when the Bible tells that “men began to call on the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26), “by intended literary contrast, Cain perpetuates his own name in the self-sustaining security of the city” (Conn 2000:18–19). Building a city was therefore an intentional attempt to create a present and
future safeguarded space where God no longer would have any influence or authority.

These two possible views on the conception of urban life contrast the dual nature of the city—a place where God’s gracious concern for his fallen creation and rebellious children is demonstrated while at the same time living in a city can be a way to seek security and self-gratification apart from God’s presence and guidance.

The Biblical Use of the Term “City”

When Scripture mentions a “city”—besides the common definition implied in the word itself—there are at least four main meanings in its utilization and importance (Murray 1990:22–23). First, cities, especially capital cities, are often regarded as representing nations. This is clearly seen in Jesus’ words: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matt 23:37). Jerusalem is referred to not only as a unique geographical location but also as a symbol of the whole Jewish nation.

Second, cities are regarded as corporate personalities, representing in different ways much more than a mere collection of individuals. In other words, the corporate personality of a city is an important aspect of the biblical meaning of a city.

A third use of the term city in the Bible is found in its use as an institution or spiritual reality. For instance, in the book of Revelation, Babylon “stands for the world without God, [a] secular culture, the exclusion of moral and spiritual absolutes” (Murray 1990:22). The city imagery is used in this way to describe the worldliness of human life in its ultimate form.

Finally, a fourth use of “city” in the Scriptures symbolizes the conflict between good and evil, where the great battle for human hearts and minds develops within its boundaries. Naturally, according to the Bible, “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). “Sin is present everywhere, but it is concentrated and reaches its most virulent form in the city. The cities are spiritual focal points where the key spiritual battles are fought” (Murray 1990:23). Evil and its malignant influence are found in all corners of this planet, but apparently—mainly because of the systems that control human life—its headquarters is located in the city.

The controversy between God and Satan for the control of the city is expressed throughout Scriptures. However, there is a particularly intriguing way in which this conflict manifests itself in the contrast drawn between the cities of Babylon and Jerusalem.
The Great Conflict in the City

In the Bible there is an alternating pattern of reproof of the city in which the ideal Jerusalem never became a full reality, and Babylon, the central and intentional power aligned against God and his people. Both are presented as types in the great conflict between good and evil. The whole world thus is in constant war whereas the “greatest battle goes on inside our cities; the battle between God and Satan” (Linthicum 1991:23). However, the fullest description of this inevitable conflict between Babylon and Jerusalem—between good and evil—is emphatically presented as one of the basic themes in the Book of Revelation.

The City as Babylon

Babylon is one of the dominant themes in the Bible. The city is first introduced in Genesis 10 in humanity’s decision to build the city of Babel. The history of the city and the tower of Babel is intimately connected with its builders’ proud attempts to avoid scattering (Gen 11:4, 8, 9), and to make a name for humanity that would defy heaven (Gen 11:4). The people in Babel were instructed to fill the world, but instead they resisted God’s mandate by staying in one place in their attempt to be unified and exclude God from their lives (Goldingay 1989:8, 9). Babylon is, therefore, portrayed as a symbol of a city fully given to Satan and controlled by evil powers. From Genesis to Revelation Babylon represents the dark side of life and the evil existence found in cities in the past and continuing today. Commenting on the oppression and persecution enforced by Babylon upon the Jewish nation of the past, Wheeler asserts:

The Jews would never forget their suffering under Babylon, nor the Babylonian empire’s hostility to the people of God. . . . [Babylon] grew in the minds of the Jewish people into a symbol of all persecution and oppression. . . . [The Jews] began to use its name as a symbol, a code word. By the time of Christ, Babylon had become a code name for Rome the new world power that now occupied Palestine. . . . The Christian church, developing out of the Jewish faith, was familiar with this tradition of using Babylon as a symbol of the forces of evil. (Wheeler 1981:12)

The “Babylon theme,” however, reaches its climax in the book of Revelation. John’s vision of the “fallen Babylon” (14:8) was probably seen as real comfort to him and his readers, personifying the deliverance from the evil powers of Satan while introducing the eternal victory of God.
The City as Jerusalem

In contrast to Babylon, Jerusalem, in its idealized form is portrayed in Scripture as the city fully dedicated to God, the holy city that was intended to be a symbol of God’s presence and power in the world (Neh 11:1; Jer 3:17; 29) and intrinsically connected to salvation history (Isa 40–66; Zac 14). In the Old Testament, “Jerusalem and the temple are presented as the place where God chose to establish his special redemptive-revelational relationship with His people. In the New Testament Jerusalem is based on the high evaluation of the city in the Old Testament” (DeYoung 1960:28).

Jerusalem was the city chosen by God to represent himself on earth; nevertheless, it was still identified with the same debilities and shortcomings of any other city. “She never escapes from all the characteristics of the city, as is indicated by the accusations constantly aimed at her, aimed at the sins she never ceases falling into anew. Her sins are those of other cities; she acts like them and is condemned like them” (Ellul 2011:97). Because Jerusalem rejected God’s plan when the nation rejected the Messiah, it was condemned to be destroyed (Matt 23:37–39; 24:2)—yet it remains as a type of the future New Jerusalem (Gal 4:24–25).

Therefore, Jerusalem served as a witness city because it existed to demonstrate God’s actions to human beings. But in the end, in order to fulfill his purposes God goes even further in his eternal adoption of humanity: he becomes the builder of a heavenly city.

The consummation of this pilgrimage to the heavenly city is the New Jerusalem portrayed in the Book of Revelation, the definitive fatherland of all the redeemed, the city as redemption symbol par excellence. All the Old Testament imagery of divine victory and consequent house building is repeated in the history of the New Jerusalem, the restored and consummated paradise of God. (Conn 1979:246)

The New Jerusalem apparently depicts a reversal. The city—originally conceptualized as the center of rebellion—now becomes a center of reconciliation because of God’s mercy and grace (Badenas 1988:16). In the beginning at Creation God gave the first couple a garden as their home. In the re-creation God gives redeemed humanity a city as their home. Both the garden and the city function as centers of worship—a sanctuary—the center of God’s presence (Davidson 1997). The New Jerusalem comes into existence only because of God’s actions, not human action. In addition, at the end of the age there is no place for what both Babylon and Jerusalem represent.
The Urban Challenge

In the light of the great controversy between Christ and Satan as seen in the conflict between Jerusalem and Babylon, this article proposes at least two crucial themes revolving around the city: rebellion and redemption. Understanding these themes becomes fundamental in the development of models for urban missiology.

The Rebellion in the City

Rebellious and dislocation are part of the effects of Adam’s sin on human culture and things that are often found in the cities of the world. Cain the murderer and first city builder defied the curse by putting down roots in a city he intended as a new beginning, his new creation. The city has, then, “a spiritual influence. It is capable of directing and changing a man’s spiritual life” (Ellul 2011:9). Thus, the first human decision to build a city was clearly a decision to oppose God and his purposes for humanity. That rebellious act went beyond an individual sin, for too often the sins in a city becomes “systemic and corporate” (Bakke 1997:62), infiltrating every urban system with corruption, oppression, and injustice (Linthicum 1991:46).

This perspective makes it possible to recognize the essential nature of the religious conflicts that such rebellion generates and that take place in all the world’s cities. In the battle between what Babylon and Jerusalem represent is found the type of spiritual warfare that embraces every city. This is why, as Greenway and Monsma point out, there are “two cities within every single city. There are Babylon with its citizens and Jerusalem with its citizens. These two are essentially at odds, for they serve different masters and live by different standards” (2000:7). The master of one is Christ; the master of the other is Satan.

Those who live and work in cities may be very realistic about the city’s essential nature and the cause of the constant disappointments that happen when people attempt to ameliorate life in the city. The root of the problem is the insubordination, independence, and indifference left as Cain’s legacy. No human action can change the nature of the world’s cities. “These cities are temporary, under the curse, and someday will be removed to make a way for the heavenly city, which the Scriptures promise. A clear understanding of this fact is extremely important for urban workers. Naive utopianism should find no place in urban missiology, for it is as self-defeating as it is unbiblical” (Greenway and Monsma 2000:8).

However, if the nature and essence of the city are evil why would God use it in his redemptive purposes? Why would God, apparently, give his stamp of approval on a purely human idea?
The Redemption in the City

The city that comes down from heaven, however, is fundamentally distinct from any earthly one. It is a perfect new creation, readied to be the dwelling place of newly transformed humanity. The New Jerusalem becomes then an eternal indication that God does not eradicate human history, but somehow transforms and embraces it (Badenas 1988:15). Out of a flawed purpose, God creates a perfect work.

According to this perspective God makes the best of a bad situation (Casey 1991:47). And amazing as it may seem, from all the available images and symbols God uses to portray an eternal home for fallen (but redeemed) humanity, God chooses a city. He “graciously takes up the idea of the city, the creation of humankind after the Fall, and redeems it” (48). The same redemptive reality should constantly be present in the mission God’s people seek to fulfill in the cities around the world.

In cities the fiercest battles for human minds and hearts take place. For that reason, cities are center stage for the Christian mission, the great drama of redemption. Understanding this, Christians ought not to flee the urban battlefield, but rather they should purposely choose to be in the city and occupy all the corners of urban life, bearing the light, salt, and leaven of the gospel. (Greenway and Monsma 2000:8; emphasis supplied)

This redemptive perspective was incorporated in all the covenants portrayed in Scriptures, where Jerusalem became a sign, a witness to God’s work of grace, which will be consummated in the heavenly city—the New Jerusalem. The redemptive victory of Christ is finally celebrated over Babylon, the great enemy in John’s Revelation. Now in the New Jerusalem, “all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord” (Jer 3:17). In God’s city will be consummated the redemption of the city systems—religious, economic, and political, becoming transformed systems centered in the worship of the Lamb (Rev 21:22) and not self-centered as was Cain’s objective when the first city was built.

Conclusion

A continuing battle between God and Satan is represented in the comparison drawn between the city imagery portrayed through the conflict between the ancient cities of Babylon and Jerusalem. This conflict is depicted in the post-fall period through the actions taken by Cain. By building a city Cain sought to recreate God’s creation, giving it his own form. The decision to build the first city was centered in the false perception of security apart from God. This sad reality of explicit rebellion, found its...
prominent expression in the decision taken by Cain’s descendants to build the tower of Babel, but that decision only resulted in more confusion and alienation. In contrast, God chose another city, Jerusalem, to represent his redemptive power in the midst of disorder and rupture.

In order to achieve the final victory and implement God’s solution—the eternal city, the New Jerusalem—it is first necessary for all evil powers represented by Babylon to be completely destroyed and annihilated. For the New Jerusalem to arise it is necessary for Babylon to fall, because when sin’s history ends there is no longer any place for the reality of what has been since the Fall—conflict between two powers for the hearts and minds of people on this planet. At the end, only one power will be victorious, as John’s Revelation clearly describes the final redemptive actions leading up to the establishment of God’s eternal presence in the city “whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

The use of city imagery found in Revelation suggests that every city has both good and evil, for every city is the battlefield between the god of Babylon and the God of Jerusalem seeking influence and control over peoples’ minds and allegiance. The message this suggests to all Christians is to recognize the nature of urban life and the impossibility of a complete regeneration of its systems. Nevertheless, God’s people must pray for the city’s welfare and promote its true good, for the city’s deepest struggle is spiritual. In addition, because of God’s redemptive intervention in history Christians should not flee from the city, for the Spirit of Christ can empower his people in their mission of salvation that must be proclaimed on the streets of all the cities of the world.

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