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# 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 front-line 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 excellent* (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 participates 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

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 possible 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 mission. "How radically different is Paul's missional willingness to adjust his hermeneutic for the sake of others, when contrasted to the Western tendency 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 Scripture, 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 translation. 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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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.

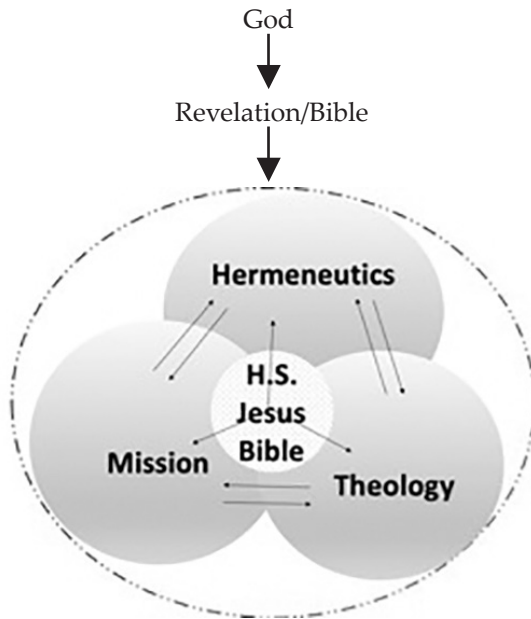
### For Reflection and Discussion

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 → Revelation/Bible → Hermeneutics → Theology → Mission

#### Spiral/Circular Model



#### Conclusion

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

<sup>1</sup>There 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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