

PETR ČINČALA

Making Hermeneutics Do Its Job: Impact of Interdisciplinary Factors on Interpreting the Bible

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.

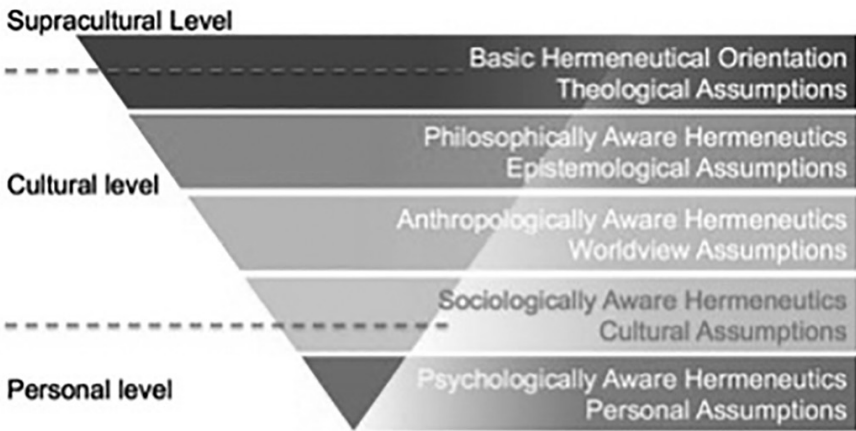


Figure 1. Missiological Hierarchy of Assumptions for Informed and Balanced Hermeneutics

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” (Pfundl 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 rapid 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).

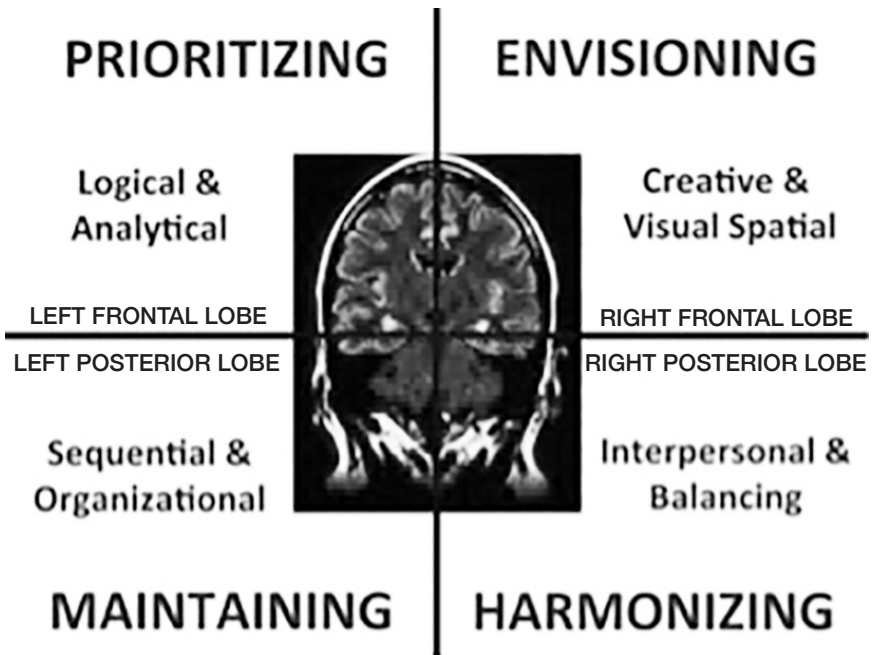


Figure 2. Four Quadrants of the Brain and Their Qualities

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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Petr Činčala, MDiv, MSW, PhD, married, four children, served as a freelance missionary among Czech Atheists for 10 years, presently works at Andrews University as a director of the Institute of Church Ministry, assistant Professor of World Mission, Director of NCD America, Executive Editor of the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.