

## **Ordination of Women and the Two Ways to Unity: Ecclesiastical and Biblical**

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In the latest administrative push the General Conference has laid down a worldwide roadmap for solving the most painful “thorn” of disunity today – ordination of women. By involving all 13 divisional research committees as well as providing its own study committee on ordination (TOSC), the administration demonstrates a clear desire for a solution by 2015. However, with the recent “independent” moves of some unions to ordain women into pastoral ministry at the present time, the tension is the highest it has been for several decades. Can, however, the political effort bring an end to the disunity this time?

In this paper I will try to address this question in the following 4 steps: In the first section (1), I will briefly look at the present roadmap by the GC and reflect about its potential to provide a solution to the issue of women’s ordination.

In the second section (2), I will address the issue of women’s ordination itself and use it as a window on the nature and depth of the disunity problem. Then in the third section (3), I will begin to explore more closely the issues arising from the hermeneutical dialogue, and in the last section (4), I will suggest a specific proposal for continuing the hermeneutical dialogue.

### **1. The Potential of the Present Road-mapping of the General Conference: The End of the ‘Great Controversy’ of Adventism?**

Adventist social media have in recent months and years provided very good summaries of the developments regarding the question of women’s ordination. There is no need to repeat these summaries here. Indeed the developments are picking up speed as 2015 is approaching. Thus it becomes almost impossible to say on a given day: ‘This is the latest state of affairs as far as this issue is concerned’. This ASRS meeting is taking place in the middle of the work of the GC’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee which is presently receiving all the reports and studies from each division research committee. Thus the situation is very fluid.

However, what we know is the basic roadmap and the direction in which we are travelling. The General Conference at session in 2010 decided to give the topic of ordination and the ordination of women another ‘look’ and by 2015 agree on a solution that could be theologically and practically acceptable to the whole church body.

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This is indeed an ambitious plan given the long history of the debate, which began in 1881. What is different about this attempt, however, as GC administration would probably point out, is that this time the roadmap includes the theological voice, or perhaps we should call it the academic voice, of all 13 biblical research divisional committees. The General Conference itself is also involved through the work of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) which is steering the worldwide study process.

Now a potential problem with this ambitious plan or roadmap is in its vague definition of what exactly will happen with the academic voices that are being heard in the GC TOSC. While all the research groups have the power to recommend, it is only the GC Administrative Committee and the Annual Council that have the power to vote a final recommendation, which may or may not go to the floor of the GC session for a vote in 2015. On the one hand, this makes the process more complex, and perhaps vague, but on the other hand, there is at least a roadmap in place now. So is the discussion really coming to an end? Can the ‘great controversy’ of Adventism really end satisfactorily in 2015?

With the recent moves of some unions to ordain women into pastoral ministry, or to approve ordination of women already today, the tension is the highest it has been for some decades. When I first began to work on this matter in the mid 90s, it was at the height of the publishing campaign of both sides who were intensely printing materials in support of their view of the case. Later when I began to work on this issue on a doctoral level, most of the books were already in circulation, but there was no sign of the sides coming closer together. To my surprise, just as I was finishing the work on my dissertation in 2009, the issue once again became very ‘hot’ after a period of relative calm. Now the tension has reached boiling point.

So, in order to address the workability of the present ambitious roadmap to unity, we need to address the question of the divide, or the depth of the divide, between the two views of ordination. If it turns out that the level of disagreement is mostly technical – a matter of policy, than the solution is an obvious one. If it turns out that the disagreement is fundamentally biblical or hermeneutical, than the solution may not be just a new policy. While probably we accept that this in fact may not be a question of ‘either or’ – but ‘to what degree’ – then it may well follow that *the wider the biblical divide is, the less effective the ecclesiastical solution will be, and vice versa. The smaller the biblical-interpretative divide is, the more effective the ecclesiastical pragmatic solution in 2015 will be. The question is, what is the proportion between the two?*

This being my premise, it is fundamental that the scholarship, and hopefully also the administration of the church, have some awareness about the depth of division in both areas – pragmatic/policy and the biblical-hermeneutical. Without understanding these fundamentals, the proposed solutions could simply turn out to be well-intended and expensive punches in the dark without really hitting anything.

## 2. Women's Ordination as a Window on the Nature and the Depth of Disunity

So in light of what has been said and done on the matter, and in the light of the latest administrative attempt to provide a way out of the rough waters which presently rock the boat of the church - what are the issues at stake? What is at the core of the tension and could the 'great controversy' really be coming to an end? Let me share with you what I perceive, as a scholar who has spent significant time studying the matter, to be the core issues which have to be faced before negotiating a lasting way out of the 'great controversy'.

### *First: Grasping the Controversy*

As we have noticed, the long standing debate about the role of women in ministry has, more than anything else, washed up deep cultural, interpretative and theological divisions in Adventism. Adventist theology does not have a common mind on this matter, but worryingly the problem goes far deeper. The topic of the ordination of women is only symptomatic of the divide which exists in other areas, such as the view of Scripture, the doctrine of inspiration or how interpretation should operate generally. These are no minor matters. When I began to read seriously in this field I discovered to my surprise that while there is a lot of material out there, yet there is an utter lack of clarity as to what is really going on behind these theological positions. There is a lack of transparency and a tendency to talk over each other's positions without understanding what the deeper core issues are. Thus I began to realize that the first thing that needs to be done is clearing the ground. This is precisely what I have attempted to do in my dissertation, which was published as a book *Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study in Biblical Interpretations* (2012)<sup>1</sup>. So what is going on in the thinking of the two sides?

### *Second: What Makes the Opponents' Case Tick*

If we first look at the opponents, we see how they claim and take the Bible to be a plain word of God which is not difficult to understand. The Bible is, therefore, clear concerning the matter of women's role in ministry. Texts such as 1 Timothy 2:9-15, 3:1-7 and 1 Corinthians 11: 3-16 or 14:33-36 clearly state that the office of elder/pastor is reserved for men only, due to the so called 'male headship' principle which was established in the Bible at the beginning in Genesis 1 and 2. Therefore, women are called to serve, but not in the special leadership and teaching positions of elder or pastor. To be more precise, women are indeed called to preach the gospel, but their teaching or preaching cannot be authoritative (1 Tim 2:12). There is a gender requirement as part of the criteria for church leadership.

By opponents, Scripture is thus taken in the literal sense of the reader. This assures that the authority of Scripture is preserved. Moreover, Scripture is not culturally conditioned: when the NT authors wrote out their instructions on church organization of ministry, these do not represent their concern for cultural sensitivity but are a universally applicable message.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently available through the book's own webpage: [sdaordinationbook.com](http://sdaordinationbook.com).

Scripture in its nature is thus clear, and one should not explain it away by historical or cultural contexts.

On the deeper level, where does this concern for plainness and clarity of Scripture and the resulting theology of male headship and the male ministry criteria come from? Well, it comes from how opponents define biblical inspiration. For them, inspiration is a process by which God imparts objective and ‘uncontaminated’ information to a human author, or prophet. In this process, there is no cultural or personal impact on the content of the message by the author. The inspiration is under the full control of God. Hence the message of the author is the message of God, and if the NT author says, ‘the elder then must be the husband of one wife,’ (1 Tim 3:2) than it presents clear divine criteria for such an office. It is divine inspiration which assures that Scripture has a clear and plain meaning, and consequently it should be interpreted literally. So in a nutshell, this is how the thinking of opponents operates. Any attempt to advance the discussion forward will have to recognize these core issues.

### *Third: What Makes the Proponents’ Case Tick*

Now, if we take proponents of women’s ordination, what are the core issues shaping their thinking, and could an exit dialogue perhaps be generated if there is clarity as to what is going on? The case of proponents hangs on the key message of Galatians 3:26-29, which says that in Christ ‘there is neither male or female’. The overall biblical context for them teaches that just as the Fall brought about female submission, so redemption in Christ brings gender equality which also has implications for church ministry. Scripture contains the key principle of restoration in Christ which needs to be taken into account when handling the specific texts regarding church organization.

Therefore, the reading of proponents is generally more principle-based than literal or plain. They are asking: What are the larger principles operating behind the texts?

Why are they seeking broader principles rather than the direct and literal reading? Well, it boils down, just as in the case of opponents, to how they perceive the nature of Scripture as defined by inspiration. For them, biblical inspiration is a mediated process in which God imparts information that is then ‘contaminated’ by the social, cultural, historical and language context of the human author. In its nature, Scripture, while containing the divine message, also contains human baggage. For this reason, a plain reading of Scripture could potentially be misleading. An interpretation needs to devise meticulous exegetical methods which address the cultural, social and historical conditions. The aim of such ‘scientific’ interpretation is, then, to distinguish between what is divine principle - universally applicable message, and what is the author’s historical application in the text - the message reflecting his conditions, but not necessarily applicable for the church today.

Hence, in contrast to opponents, who maintain that the language of the Bible should be seen as a plain divine message, proponents maintain that the language of the Bible is imperfect. Bible authors with their own cultural and historical concerns have shaped the divine message.

Thus reading and interpretation needs to ask: What are the broader principles behind the text which the church could take and apply in its current ministry?

*Fourth: The End in 2015?*

So where does this leave the ‘great controversy’ or the hopes for a solution in 2015? I am afraid that if the above analysis is only partly correct, it leaves the church with a bit of serious work to do. While theological unity in the church is always desirable and should be sought, unity of mind cannot be forced by any external process. It appears to me that at the core of the long-standing debate on women’s ministry is the issue of very different hermeneutical mindsets. It is not just a matter of theological convictions or cultural sensitivities which divide the sides. It is something more fundamental.

*The basic assumptions about (1) the nature of inspiration, (2) the nature of Scripture, and consequently (3) the nature of interpretation are the core issues that make opponents and proponents tick in their own theological ways. There is therefore no simple theological or administrative patch which can be applied to bring a desired unity. Even if the 13 division committees and the GC TOSC committee will restudy the subject from the perspective of ‘ordination’ as such, it still begs the question just how deep into the basic convictions theological studies can reach without seriously addressing these three core issues.*

Rather, the question of hermeneutics and its nature has to be raised fair and square if the minds of committed opponents and proponents are to be convinced. Undoubtedly, there is much more to be said on this problem (which I do in my book), but one thing appears fated: Unless both sides make conscious attempts to address the critical questions of their hermeneutical positions, there is every chance that the theological differences between the two sides will remain unresolved even after 2015.

### **3. Arising Issues for Adventist Hermeneutical Dialogue**

With this in mind then, what are the hermeneutical issues arising from this discussion? First and foremost, the topic of WO is a painful but maybe necessary reminder, primarily for scholars, that perhaps we have not been very successful in addressing the critical questions of hermeneutics. After all, the church has been discussing the question back and forth for over a century, and both sides use the same biblical texts, yet they interpret Scripture very differently. Still, both sides believe they follow the true biblical/ Adventist interpretation. So the topic of WO serves us an invitation to engage with the issue of interpretation even more.

Several papers in the recent TOSC meetings specifically discussed the question of interpretation. But no serious explanation as to *why* a specific model was proposed has been provided. There was no ‘so what’ after the views were presented. Where does this view leave us as one interpretative community? Why has this specific hermeneutical proposition been promoted? Even beyond the TOSC, there is virtually no discussion in Adventism on the theory of hermeneutics. It appears that people are simply *presupposing* that interpretation is

enough to treat with few basic foundational concepts and that out of these we can easily build a model.

One author after another in the most comprehensive up-to-date volume on the Adventist approach to hermeneutics defines biblical models without discussing the nature of interpretation itself. There is no sustained and in-depth discussion provided as to why we perceive interpretation like we do. Who told us that the nature of interpretation is simply to find tools and methods that open the treasure of the Word of God, like a key opens a treasure box? That if I have the right set of keys and have the right attitude of belief, than I will be able to open the box? This appears to be the basic assumption behind much of Adventist interpretation today.<sup>2</sup>

There are at least two major issues arising from the ordination debate:

*1. Reduction of the Problem of Hermeneutics to Exegesis (the textual problem)*

Most of Adventist interpretation assumes that discovering what the text meant is essentially the task of interpretation. '[W]hat the biblical text meant in principle in its original setting is precisely what the text means for us today.'<sup>3</sup> If this is the case as some Adventist interpreters suggest, then hermeneutics essentially becomes exegesis with a bit of additional application attached to it.

But can hermeneutics be reduced to a discussion of what guidelines should be followed to interrogate the text, basically to questions of exegesis?

*2. Reduction of the Problem of Hermeneutics to Right Attitude*

The second issue arising from the ordination debates is the reduction of the problem of hermeneutics to the reader's presuppositions. While the first issue is more characteristic of proponents' hermeneutics, which are an attempt to develop robust technical rules, the second issue is more applicable in the case of opponents. It is assumed that the key to right interpretation is the attitude of the reader. Reading Scripture itself is not complicated, it is simple: what one essentially needs is the right attitude of faith.

There are indeed few encouraging signs that Adventist interpreters are actually aware of the reader's problem. An example of clearly spelling out the problem is found in Fernando Canale's suggestion that 'the task envisaged here must take into consideration three different

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise but more substantial introduction to this problem see my analysis in chapter 4 of my book: *Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study in Biblical Interpretations* (Belgrade: Preporod, 2012), pp. 253-311.

<sup>3</sup> Ekkehardt Müller, 'Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture,' in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Georg W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), p. 113 (111-134). The next sentence however is more nuanced in its suggestion: 'Any application of a text to our situation must be tied to the original meaning' (Ibid.).

levels of hermeneutics: (1) the hermeneutics of the text, (2) the hermeneutics of theological issues, and (3) the hermeneutics of philosophical principles...presupposed by the exegete.’<sup>4</sup>

Canale’s statement is one of the clearest admissions in the Adventist discussion on interpretation that there is indeed a philosophical problem with the *exegete* as well as the *text*. He observes that both deserve hermeneutical attention.

Unfortunately, while the biblical text in our discussions on hermeneutics receives a lot of attention, it is the more obscure subject of interpretation that draws the shortest straw. Here is how we get around the problem.

Opponents explain away the problem by a simply appealing to the right attitude of the exegete. With the right attitude, interpretation is a matter of plain reading strategy under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Proponents, on the other hand, explain away the ‘reader problem’ mainly (but not exclusively), by developing robust systems of guidelines which assure that exegesis discovers the original meaning of the text with scientific-like ‘objective’ precision. The better the rules, the better the chance there is to uncover the original historical meaning, and that meaning is in effect assumed to control the attitude of the interpreter.

What I am observing is that the problem of the reader is not unknown to Adventist interpreters, but it is explained away without giving it due theoretical or hermeneutical attention. Certainly the questions of how language works, and how meaning and understanding are formed are questions that belong to this discussion. And they have not really been raised at any *fora* or in any books or articles that I am aware of.

Mark Noll warns Evangelical scholarship at large, to which we undoubtedly also belong, that the models of our thinking about Scripture and interpretation were formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century milieu of the American Didactic Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> It is not easy to hear this, because we tend to overgeneralize the issue by suggesting that the methods we use are essentially the methods of the Reformers.

Yes, it is true that the Protestant Reformations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century have brought a paradigm shift in how Scripture is perceived and used, and we do follow in the tradition of that paradigm shift. Yet the specific models, approaches and understanding of what exactly their big slogans (such as *sola scriptura*) mean, what hermeneutics is practically and theoretically, and how the reader’s worldview and language function in interpretation, these have never been fully explained by the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>4</sup> Fernando Canale, ‘Revelation and Inspiration,’ in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Georg W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), p. 51 (47-74).

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 83-88.

In many ways Luther used the classical fourfold medieval method of interpretation, while Calvin used classical philosophers all his life to aid his interpretation. And Zwingli has been heavily criticized by the Radical Reformers that he was not radical enough in his *sola scriptura* approach.

Yes, we have inherited big slogans which help us to define the basic boundaries within which Scripture should function. But how exactly these function, what it means to follow them practically and methodologically, this has not really been provided for us with this Protestant legacy.

I am sure you know that most of the ‘exegetical’ robustness of Protestant reading was based on philological models of humanists, such as the one developed by Erasmus. Yet humanists, in many ways held rationalistic and naturalistic assumptions. Thus it is well recognized that the Protestant hermeneutical thinking is also partly a child of humanist assumptions as well as Scriptural-theistic assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

The most authoritative volume in Adventism on biblical interpretation *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (2006) only assumes, but never explains how or why the ‘Historical-grammatical’ method, recommended as the preferred method, is the method that indeed arises out of Scripture. It is suggested in the volume that Seventh-day Adventism promotes ‘a system of biblical interpretation derived from Scripture itself.’<sup>7</sup> The trouble is that the chapter where this claim appears does not explain generally or in detail just how the emergence of ‘Historical-grammatical’ hermeneutics at the time of the Reformation is a system that has arisen from Scripture.

Now this is not a criticism against the Historical-grammatical method as such, but only a reflection that we tend to assume that hermeneutics has been given to us as a ready-made gift from the Reformation time. Yet there is very little discussion on what exactly this hermeneutics was and how exactly the big Protestant slogans functioned.

Furthermore, it is not clear how *sola scriptura*, which became the main slogan of some Protestantism, is linked with what we call the ‘Historical-grammatical method’. How is it that

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen B. Chapman, ‘Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible,’ in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation (Scripture & Hermeneutics Series, Vol. 7)*, ed. Graig Bartholomew, Scot Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, Al Wolters (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster & Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 189 (167-206). Chapman writes: ‘From the perspective of canonical theology, then, historical criticism and evangelicalism do not appear to be strangers to each other at all but unacknowledged bedfellows. Historical criticism is in fact exposed as a secularized version of the evangelical stance toward Scripture, with its privileging of the “original” or the “earliest”... and its location of meaning in the history “behind” the text. Similarly, evangelicalism reveals itself to be much more beholden to historical criticism than it realizes or is willing to concede, with its Enlightenment assumptions and empirical anxieties’ (Ibid.).

<sup>7</sup> Alberto R. Timm, ‘Historical Background of Adventist Biblical Interpretation,’ in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Georg W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), p. 12, cf. pp. 3-4, (1-14).



already at the time of the Reformation there were groups of Radical Reformers, who in fact criticized the key mainline reformers that they did not follow *sola scriptura*?

It has been well demonstrated that even the Lutheran programme of Reformation was not able to give the Bible to people and say to them: ‘Read it and we will come to the same conclusions’. The 1525 Peasants’ Uprising definitely convinced Luther that people cannot just *read* Scripture, and that Scripture cannot interpret itself *without* some basic explanation about interpretation. So the result was that people were given Luther’s small catechism and that was the guide for their Bible reading.<sup>8</sup> Is this a model of how *sola scriptura* should function in Adventism, or just one of the models of how it functioned at the time, but in our time it is different?

My research into the rationale of the opponents’ and proponents’ hermeneutics has, I hope, demonstrated sufficiently that the dynamic that operates behind both models is driven by fundamental assumptions about the nature of inspiration, the nature of Scripture, and consequently, the nature of interpretation as such.<sup>9</sup> Both models work with fundamental assumptions about these three; yet they do not discuss them in a clear manner (except perhaps the nature of inspiration which has received a lot of theoretical attention in Adventism). I think this is a weakness in both positions because a clearer explanation of basic rationale would provide more hope for mutual understanding.

Most books and articles on women’s ordination have expressed theological views but not really examined the fundamentals of hermeneutical thinking. Having theological dialogue in which the text of Scripture is already discussed in a certain way is not the same as having a discussion about interpretation as such.

It took me an enormous amount of time to get beyond the theological or biblical level of argumentation to comprehend the deeper structure of the logic and fundamental assumptions of both sides. The debate - agreements and disagreements - is mostly happening on the level of theological/textual arguments. This is where the main battlefield is. But I have only rarely read a clear and well-argued discussion on what the fundamental assumptions behind those positions are.

Famously, the first edition of *Women in Ministry* does not even contain a hermeneutical chapter. However, even in volumes which do contain some sort of hermeneutical discussion, it has been mostly related to the questions of rules and models of interpretation – i.e.

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1993) and *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> While I have practically demonstrated the outworking of the principle, Fernando Canale has theoretically explained the same dynamic: ‘Interpretation of biblical texts and theological issues is conditioned by the doctrine of R-I [revelation-inspiration], which in turn depends on the philosophical principles presupposed by the exegete’. Fernando Canale, ‘Revelation and Inspiration,’ in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Georg W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), p. 51 (47-74).

essentially exegesis with some theological rules, but no deeper elaboration on why exactly this approach to Scripture is taken or these rules provided. I have rarely seen the discussion of specific rules linked with the much larger philosophical and epistemological frameworks undergirding the specific rules.

It was painstaking to work back from textual interpretations to hermeneutical rules, and even further back to assumptions about the hermeneutical process - be they philosophical or epistemological. But I felt this was absolutely essential for having any chance of better assessing the depth of the divide. I hoped and I still hope that clarity in the way we do interpretation and what we think about interpretation will serve as a platform for dialogue to move forward.

If there is a way forward in this question of the ordination of women, a way that is not just political or based on tolerance – but a way that is based on mutual understanding of *why* we have arrived at these conclusions and *why* others have arrived at other conclusions – a way where we move forward in biblical and hermeneutical dialogue and not toleration only – than this process – this journey must start with addressing fundamental questions of biblical interpretation.

It must be a biblical way that takes us forward, and perhaps more than ever, biblical scholarship in Seventh-day Adventism must take the lead and responsibility for this to happen. Addressing fundamental questions of biblical interpretation is a much harder and more complicated route and requires more time and energy. The political or ecclesiastical route to finding peace for co-existence is perhaps more appealing and quicker, and maybe it is not entirely inappropriate given the complexity and size of our church, but fundamentally it does not create a platform for future biblical dialogue, but only entrenches the present attitudes, storing up more areas of tension for the future.

This leads me then to a very specific proposition for a way forward in Adventist dialogue.

#### **4. A Specific Proposal for Hermeneutical Dialogue.**

Seventh-day Adventist scholarship should be alerted to the fact that in the recent decades there have been massive changes in biblical interpretation. Specifically, the shift from questions about the original ‘Sitz im Leben’, which was the main concern for both Historical-critical and Historical-grammatical methods, to questions about the ‘Sitz in der Literatur’.

‘Studies of intertextual relationships and those focused on the practice of “inner-biblical exegesis” have brought out stronger connections’ between various genres such as wisdom, the narrative, poetic, cultic, prophetic and legal. ‘What in pre-modern exegesis went under the name of the “unity of Scripture” (*unitas scripturae*) and was then largely lost during the dominance of pre-modern [Enlightenment] exegesis... has, under changed methodological

and hermeneutical presuppositions, come back into view as a space in which a polyphony of voices can be heard.’<sup>10</sup>

It is intriguing that even Catholic scholarship is now recognizing significant shifts and developments towards a more unified hermeneutical approach to Scripture - a hermeneutics that is concerned with the concept of *unitas scripturae* as a fundamental tenet of biblical interpretation.

Frank Hasel rightly observes that ‘[o]nly on the basis of its unity can Scripture function as its own interpreter. Only then is it possible to come up with a harmony in doctrine and teaching.’<sup>11</sup> I think Hasel has put his finger on a crucial issue here. It is *unitas scripturae* that indeed is the practical outworking of the *sola scriptura* principle – the main Protestant Reformation slogan.

In other words, it is the actual hermeneutical exploration of scriptural unity that establishes the principle of Scripture only. Without a hermeneutical endeavor that is capable of fleshing out the principle of scriptural unity, *sola scriptura* is just a good sounding slogan.

Therefore it is my proposal that *sola scriptura* is the hermeneutical rationale of biblical interpretation, but it becomes visualized and actualized only in the practical outworking of *unitas scripturae*.

The question, then, must be asked, what ‘method’ is in the best position to draw on the *unitas scripturae*? Such an approach must not only attempt to harmonize scriptural passages or Bible verses in a superficial way, but it must crucially be able to compose an authentic biblical symphony out of the polyphony of voices in Scripture.

Biblical Theology as a discipline has been around for several decades but it has only been since the 1990s that it’s potential to cast refreshing biblical perspectives on old debates and to move beyond disunity was recognized. It has recently assumed the meaning of a ‘discipline in the theological curriculum that views the message of the Bible holistically from the perspective of Bible’s own central theme. It is a call for the *unity of the Bible*...’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, ‘Alttestamentliche Weisheit im Diskurs,’ *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Volume 125, Issue 1, April 2013, pages 118–142. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger is a professor at the Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät, University of Vienna, Austria.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Hasel, ‘Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,’ in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Georg W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), p. 37 (27-46).

<sup>12</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 68-69. Because the discipline of Biblical Theology has in the past 60 years undergone massive transformation, it is often mistaken for ‘Biblical Theology Movement’ or more recently for ‘Theological hermeneutics/interpretation,’ or ‘Canonical Theology’. While there is an ongoing discussion regarding the exact nature of the methodological proposal of the discipline, in the last decade the discipline has developed much clearer contours and moved from theoretical discussion to the production of tangible

Therefore, Biblical Theology, as a specific hermeneutical proposition, is close to Adventist ‘hermeneutical’ DNA in several specific aspects: (1) In its strong focus on the unity of Scripture – *unitas Scripturae*; (2) In its fundamental belief in Scripture as such – *sola scriptura*; (3) In its practical exploration of Scripture first over other sources – *prima scriptura*; (4) In its systemic use of the whole Bible – *tota scriptura*, and (5) In its belief in the possibility of understanding Scripture – *claritas Scripturae*.

All these are fundamental overtones of Adventist hermeneutics, but they are mostly principal statements that need not only additional theoretical clarification, but crucially more practical outworking.

It is my suggestion that the traditional Protestant slogans, which are equally part of the Adventist hermeneutical DNA, namely: *Unity of Scripture, Sola Scriptura, Prima Scriptura, Tota Scriptura and Claritas Scripturae* – are converging together in the discipline of Biblical Theology. In Adventism, it was Gerhard Hasel who always had an eye on the latest developments in this field. Up until this day he is still referenced in the latest books on Biblical Theology.<sup>13</sup> But after his untimely departure, the potentially unifying vision of Biblical Theology has almost been lost.

Ellen White believed that the unity of Scripture is achievable and a workable undertaking hermeneutically. What is more, she believed that the biblical and theological symphony of Scripture must be the ultimate task of biblical interpretation. She called it the ‘great whole of Scripture’.

It could be interesting to point out that in fact Ellen White did allude to the fact that reading the Bible requires more than just ‘searching out the various parts’ but also ‘studying their relationship’. Furthermore, she implied that readers need to make ‘the effort’ to view individual parts ‘in their relation to the grand central thought’ of the Bible. Indeed, the study of the ‘great whole’ of Scripture ‘is the highest study in which it is possible for man to engage. As no other study can, it will quicken the mind and uplift the soul’.<sup>14</sup>

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results. Thus none of the above terms describe the current state of affairs in this field. Within Adventism, apart from the involvement of Gerhard Hasel in the 1980s and 1990s, Newbold College’s department of systematic theology since mid-1990s has been working on a biblical theological proposal (for example Jan Barna, ‘The Grand Story,’ *Ministry*, March 2012, 20-22, 24; and Gunnar Pedersen and Jan Barna, ‘Towards a Biblical Theology Method: A 7-stage Theistic-Narrative Methodology,’ Tyndale Fellowship, Cambridge, UK, 7-9 July 2011). For a constructive discussion and practical results of the field, see for instance the work of Desmond T. Alexander, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Tom Holland, Christopher Wright, Graeme Goldsworthy, Craig Bartholomew, Michael Goheen, Michael D. Williams, Vaughan Roberts and Brevard S. Childs.

<sup>13</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), see especially pages 101-104, where the whole section is devoted to Gerhard Hasel’s approach to Biblical Theology discipline.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (1903), pp. 123-126.

Intriguingly enough, White's suggestion seems to point beyond the mere *compare-text-with-text* methodology as Protestantism and Adventism predominantly apply the *sola scriptura* principle. Rather, Ellen White makes a radical suggestion that readers will get the best value out of their study when reading the Bible as a coherent 'great whole' with a 'grand central thought'. Such an approach, as she implies, will shape the minds of readers as nothing else and it is 'the highest study' in which a reader can engage. This proposition moves far beyond what even William Miller envisioned for biblical interpretation. Yet this proposition has not been fully realized and integrated into our Adventist hermeneutical discussion yet.

What Ellen White essentially proposed sounds very much like the most contemporary definitions of Biblical Theology as a 'discipline in the theological curriculum that views the message of the Bible holistically from the perspective of Bible's own central theme.'<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, only a heightened awareness about the nature of interpretation and what it involves is a constructive approach for dealing with present and future Adventist controversies.<sup>16</sup> It is a daring road, because it will bring with it very sensitive and core issues. It is a road, however, which Adventist scholarship needs to travel.

Part of this undertaking is that Adventist scholarship needs to reject desires for fast 'neatly-packaged' hermeneutical solutions since they fall short of the complex critiques of seminal thinkers such as Gadamer, Wittgenstein or Thiselton concerning the influence of the Enlightenment on our current methods.<sup>17</sup> Much work is yet to be done, by both opponents and proponents of women's ordination, and not only by them.

Biblical Theology, as a middle discipline between Exegesis and Systematic Theology (and Practical Theology),<sup>18</sup> has potential that has not been fully explored in Adventist interpretation as of yet.<sup>19</sup> Exploring this potential should be a natural step for Adventist

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<sup>15</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Barna, *Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study in Biblical Interpretations* (Belgrade: Preporod, 2012), p. 318, see also ppp. 308-311.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Knowles, *Anthony Thiselton and The Grammar of Hermeneutics: A Search for United Theory* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster), p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion for example in T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2000); especially 'Exegesis and Hermeneutics,' pp. 52-72 and 'Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,' pp. 89-104.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Thiselton, being one of the leading hermeneuticians, has very favorably commented on the work of Tom Holland who is one of the leading exponents of biblical theological approach to interpretation. See Thiselton's comments on the back of Holland's last book: *Romans: The Divine Marriage: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, UK, 2011). See also Tom Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology: A Radical New Survey of the Influences on Paul's Biblical Writings* (Fearn, Tain, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2009).

interpreters, because Adventist theological and hermeneutical vision has always aspired to develop a unified biblical-theological paradigm. It would be the right step to a long forgotten suggestion of Ellen White as well. And finally, it would also be the right step on the biblical road to dialogue for opponents and proponents of women's ordination.

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