AASS 5 (2002): 61-71
Paper presented during the
AIIAS Theological Forum 2002: Hermeneutics: "How Readest Thou?"
August 14-17, 2002

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN "WHAT IT MEANT"AND "WHAT IT MEANS" AND THE TASK OF THEOLOGY

FRANCISCO D. GAYOBA, D.Theol.
Assistant Professor of Church History
AIIAS Theological Seminary

The expression, "What It Meant and What It Means" was used in 1962 by Krister Stendahl to highlight the questions the interpreter must address in deriving meaning from the Bible. The questions in the interpretation of the Bible, according to Stendahl, are "What *did* it mean?" and "What *does* it mean?" Stendahl is of the opinion that biblical theology should answer only the first question.[1] This distinction between the focus of biblical theology and that of systematic and applied theology has been generally followed by theologians.[2]

However, as Stendahl hinted, in the interpretation of biblical revelation, the challenge is to find the meaning of the Bible on both sides of the question. On the one side is the endeavor to be faithful to the past, that is, to understand the meaning of the text, passage, book, testament, and combined biblical teachings themselves in their time. On the other side is the endeavor to find the present-day significance of that biblical revelation.

It appears to me that most educated Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) are aware of the importance and basic methodology of the first side, that of biblical interpretation: the movement from the writings in their original languages, to exegesis, and to biblical theology. Many, however, even among our seminary students, are not clear on the importance and the methodology of using the Bible on the other side of biblical revelation. The other side, the attempt to be faithful

[1]Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:419.

[2]For example, see George Eldon Ladd's view that "Biblical theology is primarily a descriptive discipline. It is not initially concerned with the final meaning of the teachings of the Bible or their relevance for today. This is the task of systematic theology." George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 25.

to the Bible by arriving at its present-day significance, includes the disciplines of systematic and applied theology. The use of the Bible in applied theology has been addressed by other presenters in this Forum. The area assigned to me is the relationship of biblical studies to systematic theology.

Many years ago I took a course in systematic theology. In that course, the professor asked: "Should we, SDAs, do systematic theology?" His first answer was a strong "No." He then proceeded to give a short explanation why SDAs faithful to the normative authority of the Bible should not do systematic theology. That interchange in the classroom stimulated me to do further reading on methods in theology.[3]

When I surveyed the methods used in theology, I began to understand why that professor was so emphatic that we should not do systematic theology because of our commitment to be faithful to the Bible in thought and practice. Systematic theology attempts to clarify the contemporary meaning of truth by showing its rationality and relevance. In the attempt to show that Christian teachings are rational, this method of theological reflection often follows the rules of the prevalent philosophy of the period on how knowledge is derived. In other words, what the current philosophy accepts as acceptable sources and evidences, ways of reasoning, thought structures, and the purpose of knowledge, are often adopted into systematic theology.

Indeed, many of the meanings advocated by systematic theology are largely uncontrolled by, and different from, the teachings of the Bible. The ideas taught are based more on human interpretation and philosophy than on biblical teaching. Moreover, in the attempt to build a coherent system of teachings on a central theme, the method and conceptual framework used are *a priori* and forced upon the biblical teachings. What results may be a relevant, rational, and logically coherent system, but the conceptual framework is alien if not contradictory to biblical revelation.[4]

Considering how the above theological directions differ from our church's stand on the Bible as the basis and control of any belief and practice, my professor was right. We should not do that sort of systematic theology. But the question on whether or not we should do systematic theology was posed in a systematic theology class, by a professor of systematic theology, and asked of students who were majoring in systematic theology. Needless to say, my professor had a second answer to his question: "Yes, we do systematic theology, but within the foundation and bounds of the Bible."

[3]From this point onward, the discussion is on the main focus of the paper, systematic theology. As such, "theology" would henceforth refer to systematic theology, and "theologian" to the systematic theologian.

[4]For a discussion on the problems of systematic theology, especially in relation to the Bible, see Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon R. Lewis, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, Zondervan, 1987), 1:24.

The purpose of this paper is to show the relationship between biblical hermeneutics and theological hermeneutics. The last part of the paper reflects on how this relationship can be applied in the context of the SDA Church. For some, the things to be mentioned here will be very elementary or basic. But the intent of this paper is to give a general picture of the relationship rather than address complex issues in that relationship.

The Nature of Biblical Revelation and Hermeneutics

The nature of biblical revelation determines the tasks of and relationship between biblical and theological hermeneutics. Basic to this nature is the continuing authority of the word of God. Although biblical revelation was given in a particular historical context, it is also intended to be heard in our own times. The content and purpose of biblical revelation endures over time and is transcultural. The task of finding meaning for biblical revelation then implies that the two sides of meaning should not be separated. While the two theological disciplines have their own primary scopes, the connection or interrelatedness of the two sides should be maintained in hermeneutics. Let us look at how this relationship is translated into methodology in the specific disciplines, first by reviewing the task of biblical studies.

The Purpose of Knowing "What It Meant" Is to Arrive at "What It Means"

The movement from "what it meant" to "what it means" is described by Grant R. Osborne as the movement "from text to context."[5] This movement begins with exegesis and moves to biblical theology in order to arrive at what the Bible meant.

> The exegete studies the author's meaning on the basis of literary considerations (grammar and thought-development) and historical background (socioeconomic), then the biblical theologian works with the results and compiles patterns of unity behind the individual statements.[6]

According to Osborne, "Exegesis controls the interpretations of the text."[7] From the results of exegesis, the biblical theologian "considers underlying larger truths behind the individual expressions."[8] Though still within the bounds of biblical studies at this point of the movement, the attempt to put together "patterns

[5]Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 268.

[6]Ibid., 265.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

of unity" means that the biblical theologian is systematizing biblical teachings. Maybe we can call the gathered and systematized biblical teachings about God, salvation, mankind, and so forth, a systematic biblical theology.

But the inseparability of the two sides of meaning means that neither linguistic study and exegesis nor biblical theology constitute the end purpose of biblical hermeneutics. The task of finding meaning is not complete until the present-day relevance of that message is formulated.

At this point in the movement from what the Bible "meant" to what it "means," the boundary between the disciplines of biblical studies and systematic theology is crossed. As noted, systematization has already taken place in the area of biblical theology. While exegesis, through induction, attempts to arrive at the original meaning of the text, biblical theology, through deduction, draws united patterns of biblical truth from the collective meanings produced by exegesis, which are supra-cultural and enduring. At the point of biblical theology, the original biblical message has been decontextualized from its historical conditioning. Indeed, because biblical theology involves human interpretation, the biblical themes derived do not have the same level of authority as the inspired original biblical data. However, through sound methodology, biblical theology can derive doctrines from the Bible. So at this point of the movement in the continuum of the meaning of biblical revelation, the next step or task falls into the area of systematic theology.

What the Bible Presently "Means" Should Be Rooted in and Controlled by What the Original "Meant"

Again, the nature of divine revelation becomes the foundation both for the direction and method for doing biblical systematic theology. The first consideration is that whatever present-day message we deliver should be rooted in the content and intent of the original biblical message. Theological points should be based on sound exegesis of the text. Doctrines should be based on biblical theology, drawing upon the whole of the Bible, not just a few proof texts. Rather than using individual texts without relating them to other Bible passages, the passages used as the basis for the doctrine should be related to other biblical teachings. The methodology and the connections of the present-day message to the original biblical data must be clear for those who listen to the message. I will limit the discussion on this point because SDAs are generally strong on this part of the method.

The Present-day Meaning Should Be Relevant Even As the Original Messages Were Relevant

The second consideration is based on the quality of historicity or historical conditioning and relevance that characterized biblical revelation when it was

originally given. The implication is that this same quality should characterize the present-day aspect of explicating meaning for the biblical message.

The word of God, even when it was given in the original context, was relevant. The content of the original message and the issues originally addressed have to do with day-to-day matters. As Heb 4:12 states, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."[9]

Even the structure and organization of the presentation of the original message were contemporary. The varied literary forms and genre of the Bible indicate the different ways the persons inspired by the Spirit spoke in thought structures familiar with their listeners. The OT is mostly stories, poetry, sayings, and prophecies, expressed in concrete images and set in a narrative and metaphoric framework. The NT records that Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds, the people of the land. Jesus shifted to the organization of the rabbinic midrash when He was speaking to those exposed to the rabbinic traditions of His day. Paul used the form of Greek speeches, elaboration, and argumentation in his writings. Though Paul's concerns remained evangelistic and pastoral, yet many times the framework of thought was abstract, conceptual, and logical.[10]

The words and varied literary forms and genres in both the OT and NT indicate that the inspired writers employed cultural materials and presented their messages in terms of their contemporary language and thought forms. Their messages and the forms they employed to present these messages fitted their context. Indeed, the message of the Bible in its original setting was contextualized.

At the same time, God's intent was that the specific and relevant messages given in their original setting and meaning also become the basis for transcultural and unchangeable truth. Many centuries after the OT was written, the apostle Paul taught that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Jesus said that His words "are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The Bible should not only have meaning *then* but also *now*. The word of God was spoken and presented in relevant and contemporary thought structures *then*, challenging faith and resulting in life-changing meaning. Similarly, the word of God must also be spoken and presented in relevant and contemporary thought forms so that it can, in the *present day*, call for faithfulness to God.

The nature of divine revelation necessitates that those "dividing the word of truth" arrive not only at "what it meant" then, but also at "what it means" now.

[9]Scripture quotations are from the NKJV.

[10]For the concepts expressed in this paragraph, see James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992).

David F. Wells explains the relationship between what the Bible "meant" and what it "means," as well as the implications that arise from the relationship:

> Biblical revelation was given in a particular cultural context but it is also intended to be heard in our own context. This revelatory trajectory, then, has a point of origination and a point of arrival. It is the fact of inspiration and the contemporary work of the Spirit which secure a consistency between its *terminus a quo* and its *terminus ad quem*. The work of the Holy Spirit was such that the responsible human agents who were used in the writing of Scripture were able to employ cultural materials and, indeed, to shape the revelation in terms of their own understanding, but what God the Spirit willed should be revealed was exactly what was written, and the content and intent of this revelation were alike transcultural. The biblical revelation, because of its inspired nature, can therefore be captive neither to the culture in which it arose nor to the culture in which it arrives. It was not distorted as it was given, nor need it be distorted as we seek to understand it many centuries later in contexts far removed from those in which it was originally given.[11]

The two sides then, what the Bible "meant" and what it "means," are interrelated and should not be separated. The purpose of deriving the correct understanding of what the Bible meant is for contemporary application of meaning. This contemporary meaning and application should be grounded and bound by what the Bible meant in the original setting. The original meaning and intent of the written word of God should control the meaning and intent of present day interpretations and attempts to present the message in a contemporary way. Wells calls this relationship the "bipolar character of revelation."[12] Having explored the relationship between what the Bible "meant" and what it "means," let us now explore some of its implications for SDA theology.

Implications of the Bipolar Nature of Divine Revelation for SDA Theology

The term "systematic" in systematic theology can have several meanings. The first is that "it draws upon the whole of the Bible. Rather than utilizing individual texts in isolation from one another, it attempts to relate the various portions to one another, to coalesce the varied teachings into some type of harmonious or coherent whole."[13] The second meaning is that a theology is systematic when its teachings are "organized on the basis of educational or presentation concerns. In other words, the prime concern is to present a clear and ordered overview of the main

[11]David F. Wells, "The Nature and Function of Theology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology*, ed. R. K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 176.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, unabridged, one-vol. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 21.

themes of the Christian faith."[14] The third meaning of "systematic" is that teachings are "organized on the basis of presupposition about method. Philosophical ideas about how knowledge is gained determines the way in which material is arranged."[15] Using these meanings as levels for devising a framework for doing systematic theology, we may now look into the realm of SDA theology and examine how we have done systematic theology and reflect on its directions in light of the bipolar nature of divine revelation.

The present set of fundamental beliefs voted by the SDA world church expresses our doctrinal positions and understanding. The twenty-seven SDA Fundamental Beliefs constitute a systematized statement of biblical teachings. These are based on sound exegesis and correlated with the entire body of Scripture. Based on the officially approved statements, SDAs do systematic theology on the first level.

However, there are calls within the SDA Church to move on to the next level of systematization, that is, to order the statement of beliefs for a clearer presentation of the Adventist faith. Norman R. Gulley writes that the present arrangement of the doctrinal statements makes it appear that "each belief is of equal value."[16] There is a "lack of logical order,"[17] with no indication which doctrines are central and which are corollary. Furthermore, the current order in the presentation of doctrines is chronologically disordered. The doctrines are not arranged according to the history of redemption.[18] Gulley's suggestion is to arrange the present statements according to the order of the six major areas of classical systematic theology: the doctrines of God, humanity, Christ, salvation, the church, and the final events.[19]

George R. Knight makes a similar observation about the present list of our fundamental beliefs. Knight says that the present statements follow the "string-of-beads approach."[20] The main problem, according to Knight, is that this approach "indicates no priorities, it doesn't help people see that some beliefs are more important or more 'fundamental' than others."[21] He suggests that whatever the system of organization may be, the teachings about a personal knowledge of Christ and the salvation experience must be central or foundational.[22]

[14]Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998), 6.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Norman R. Gulley, "Toward a Christ-centered Expression of Our Faith," *Ministry*, March 1997, 25.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 26.

[20]George R. Knight, "Twenty-seven Fundamentals in Search of a Theology," *Ministry*, February 2001, 5.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., 7.

While there is a need for better clarity and order in the presentation of our fundamental beliefs, in which doctrine is central and foundational, I believe that the present nature of the statements have a crucial theological value. At present, these fundamentals are basically summaries of correlated biblical teachings, expressed in language as close as possible to the biblical language. The fundamentals are neither stated primarily in contemporary theological terms used nor do they state our belief positions in relation to a specific contemporary theological milieu. The official statement of our beliefs is a biblical systematic theology limited to the minimum essentials. It is systematic theology in the first meaning cited above, and not fully developed in terms of organization and framework for a clear and relevant presentation for a specific context. The fundamentals are more like kernels or seeds of doctrinal teachings rather than fully matured plants rooted in the soil of a specific context. This nature of the Fundamental Beliefs has an important effect on the world church.

Leaders of Protestant churches in non-Western nations have noted the ill effects of bringing in systematic theologies to their fields. What is introduced to their churches are full systematic theologies, that is, the "Bible doctrines" are ordered, worded, explained, and made relevant for Western contexts.[23] What is taking place is that another step is introduced in the movement from "what the Bible meant" to "what it means": what the Bible means in North America or Europe.

There are two basic problems with this practice. First is that what is clear, ordered, understandable, and relevant to the West may not be so in non-Western contexts. The qualities of clarity, order, and relevance are culturally rooted. Moreover, the systematic theologies are often taught first before the biblical doctrines. The systematic theologies become interpretative frameworks for interpreting the Bible. A missionary to a non-Western nation alerts us to the second problem of this separation from what the Bible meant to what it means:

> There is the danger, possibly an inevitable one, that it [the theological study and knowledge] will be founded upon and continue without, a real biblical base—external elements may become the controlling influences. To say it another way, failure to begin with and continue investigating the biblical text in its own world while studying the Christian faith leaves us without needed 'control'. Consequently, the chosen contemporary cultural or intellectual scheme may become tyrannical and impose extra-biblical influences and criteria upon

[23]"The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World," in *The Bible in Asian Contexts*, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 23.

understanding the biblical message while it is simply meant to be a framework for making applications for the modern writer's audience.[24]

The present nature of the SDA Fundamental Beliefs can spare us from such a problem. With only the basic biblical teachings voted to be the basis for doctrinal unity throughout the world church, theologians working in different contexts can formulate contextualized theologies. In the continuum of the meaning of biblical revelation, the SDA Fundamental Beliefs are just a little beyond the point of a systematic biblical theology. They are the beginnings of a biblical systematic theology. It is left for the theologians who live and think in specific contexts to take up their situation in the light of the Bible and proclaim the biblical message in terms of their specific culture. So the challenge is for pastors, teachers, and evangelists to interpret the Bible, moving from what it meant to what it means for their own specific contexts.

From my observation, the challenge of interpreting the word of God beyond the summarization and repetition of a systematized biblical theology is not emphasized much in the SDA church. I have noticed that even the definition of "theology" in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* does not emphasize much the second aspect of biblical interpretation, that is, the present meaning. It defines theology as "the ordered study of God and His relation to the world, especially by analysis of the teachings of the Old and New Testament Scriptures."[25] The definition is strong on what the Bible meant but weak on what it means. What the Bible meant must be systematized or contextualized for present contexts, resulting in a biblical systematic theology.

The continuing challenge to be faithful to the nature of divine revelation by the systematization or contextualization of biblical teachings requires that we do theology in certain directions, that systematic theology must first be biblical. The Bible must be not only the source of content but also the control of methods and frameworks in the presentation of the message. Because systematic theology is derived and fallible, it must have a sure biblical basis.

Beyond the issue of source, there are the methodological elements of form, purpose, framework, and organizing principles, which may be varied as long as they conform to or do not contradict the biblical worldview. Even as there were varied forms, presentation frameworks, and organizing principles in the Bible, so too, present-day biblical systematic theology may take many forms.

I am highlighting the issue of method because the common understanding is that systematic theology is concerned with showing the reasonableness of the

[24]J. Julius Scott Jr., "Biblical Theology and Non-Western Theology: Some Observations for the Contribution of Biblical Theology for Christianity in the So-called Two-Third's World," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25 (2001): 246.

[25]*The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), xxii.

Christian faith. In other words, if it is not focused on rationality, the work is not systematic theology. Harvie M. Conn argues that the concern for rationality in Christian theology arose from a "wrong turn" taken by theologians in the Early Church. Christianity gained inroads in the Roman Empire because, among other things, they successfully correlated the Bible to the contemporary needs and culture of the illiterate masses. However, a change took place. Christian writers addressed more and more the concerns and mindset of a few educated non-Christians. The concern was still the presentation of the gospel, but now the audience was limited to a few. What resulted was a classical theology that primarily concerned itself with rationality, a fact that is true even to this day.[26]

In light of the bipolar nature of divine revelation, faithfulness to Scripture, not rationality, should be the primary concern of systematic theology. Our concern in both biblical and theological interpretation should be faithfulness: interpreting the Bible so that we can be faithful to the original meaning, and interpreting the meaning of the Bible for the present-day so that people can be faithful in thought, feelings, and actions to the living word of God.

Another methodological issue is the starting point and focus of theology. The starting point of deriving a systematic theology should be what the Bible meant. However, the starting point of communicating a biblical systematic theology need not be what the Bible meant. The concern for faithfulness to the Bible is often translated by making the explanation of biblical passages the starting point and focus of proclaiming, "Thus saith the Lord." However, if we look at the Bible closely, messages, teachings, even sermons did not always begin with an existing passage from a prophetic writing or authoritative oral teaching. In the Bible, the communication of messages from God, as well as explanations about the will of God, often began with the experience of the people. As Alister McGrath reminds us, making experience the starting point does not mean that experience becomes the source or foundation of our theology. What it means is that theology speaks to the human experience. For McGrath, the main concern and focus of a living biblical theology should be the human experience. Christian theology should address, interpret, and transform human experience.[27]

The proposal of Philip Hughes is similar to that of McGrath. For Hughes, a biblically relevant theology should start with the actual beliefs and actions of the people. For him the relationship between what the Bible meant and what it means is translated into method in the following way:

> Christians hold that the Bible is a prime witness to the nature of ultimate reality. It has a normative function for Christians. Yet, that normative function will be

[26]Harvie M. Conn, "Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas," in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church*, ed. William Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 98-100.

[27]Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 79-88.

> executed effectively only by bringing the Bible teachings and principles into contact with our actual beliefs and patterns of actions. Rather than studying the Bible for the sake of its contents, the theological task should involve the evaluation of our actual beliefs in the light of Biblical principles. Rather than studying answers to questions we never asked, it would be better to take the question which we are asking to the Biblical witness. In these ways, the process of theology must be carried out in cultural contexts.[28]

Conn properly summarizes the central issue of this paper, namely, the relationship between what the Bible meant and what it means and the task of theology. He writes:

> Theology is always theology-on-the-road. And, in this sense, it is not simply a question of relevance or of application. It is not a two-fold question of, first theological interpretation, and then, practical application. Interpretation and application are not two questions but one. . . . Theology must always ask what Scripture says. But it always asks in terms of the questions and answers our cultures raise. And to ask what Scripture says, or what it means, is always to ask a question of application.[29]

Conclusion

The nature of biblical revelation determines that what the Bible "meant" be not separated from what it "means." The task of interpreting what it meant should have the present-day meaning as the purpose. What the Bible "means" for present-day life should be rooted in what it "meant." Moreover, the way the divine revelation was originally communicated by the Bible writers also gives present-day theologians the challenge of presenting the biblical teachings in ways that are relevant to their context. The challenge is for SDA theologians to be faithful interpreters of the Bible so that they can help God's people to think and live according to the word of God.

[28]Philip Hughes, "The Use of Actual Beliefs in Contextualizing Theology," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 2 (1984): 256.

[29]Conn, 94.