

GOD IN LIFE: A HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLE

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Pastors whose lives are immersed in congregational life are profoundly aware of the contribution theological reflection, informed by responsible hermeneutics, offers to all disciples of Christ. But they lament that believers living and serving in society often see theological work as belonging to the domain of biblical scholars while disconnected from their lives and as good scholarship but not particularly helpful or relevant to the tensions they encounter in life.¹

Theology, more specifically biblical theology, is an attempt to know God; or as William Ames asserts, theology is the knowledge of how to live in the presence of God.² What can be known about God through the light of Scripture is meant to be interwoven in the context of life's questions and to transform life. Simply put, good biblical hermeneutics changes life. That outcome should judge the hermeneutics employed in theological work.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a hermeneutic that engages the believer in a theological reflection that transforms life. Broadly understood, hermeneutics describes the formation and application of an interpretive process. Since theology belongs where life is lived, a hermeneutic that equips believers in the process of biblical interpretation in life is needed.

The hermeneutic principle we are advocating brings into focus the purpose of the revelation of God in Scripture. His purpose is to transform life and culture in our present experience. To assume less is to insult the love

¹ Donald M. Scott provides a historical overview of the concern. Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 124–25. On the other hand, Richard J. Mouw and D. Scott Cormode provide more recent critiques. Richard J. Mouw, "Challenge of Evangelical Theological Education," in *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. R. Albert Mohler and D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 285; D. Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 9.

² William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity Drawne Out of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Edward Griffin, 1639).

of God for His creation. Indeed, Scripture describes the tension between the will of God, the ideal, and our present reality. The Bible calls us to acknowledge that tension, to not be satisfied with the current reality, and to choose the will of God in our current context. A Christian hermeneutic process should serve that end, not merely clarify what God was saying in an ancient context.

The purpose of this paper will be pursued through a summary survey of hermeneutics in the Adventist tradition, an examination of the theological milieu in which Adventist theology is formed, a reflection on the role of hermeneutics in life, and finally a definition of a hermeneutic principle—God in life. This paper will describe “hermeneutic conscience” as the development of an intuitive application of the “God in life” principle in the experience of the believer and the church. We will express how this principle should guide pastors and seminary faculty to equip the members of the church to apply an appropriate hermeneutical process in the intersection of theology and life.

This paper is a collaborative effort in which the authors have equally shared the research and writing responsibilities. We have engaged in this work passionately, believing in the empowering of people to live their lives in distinctly Christ-like ways in a rapidly changing world. Living a distinctly Christ-like life requires interpretive work from every believer initiated and grounded in Scripture while embedded in their life situation. Further, as members of the seminary faculty, we believe our community is well positioned for the task of mentoring and equipping people to apply this hermeneutic principle in life.

1. A Summary Survey of Hermeneutics in the Adventist Faith Tradition

Understanding the development of hermeneutics in the Adventist tradition requires an exploration of the narratives within its history rather than a search for the defining hermeneutic principles preserved in a manuscript or a nineteenth-century volume. The movement in its formative years was marked by practical struggles to know God and His Word, largely an intuitive process undertaken by common people guided by the basic tenants of the Protestant tradition. The narratives collectively reveal that they were sometimes right and sometimes wrong in their interpretation of the Word. Consequently, some “truths” had to be jettisoned as progressive revelation which cast doubt upon positions such as the doctrine of the “shut door”³ or

³ P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 149–64.

the use of Heb 4 as a building block of modern Sabbath observance.⁴ This refining process led to a humble approach to the revelation of truth as a progressive process. By 1859, James White had encouraged pragmatic hermeneutics that moved away from the literalism which marked earlier years.⁵

The Word of God was central to the emergence of the Adventist movement. *Sola Scriptura* was an honored principle from the earliest days but it took time and dedicated effort to come to grips with the prophetic role of Ellen G. White in biblical interpretation, the use of context of the passage, and the inclusion of time and place in the process of interpretation.⁶ This trend reaches back to the morning after the great disappointment of October 22, 1844 “when the fire was rekindled”⁷ by the epiphany experienced by Hiram Edson and the subsequent re-evaluation of the texts that led to the expectation of Jesus’s return on October 22.⁸ This revelation exposed the limits inherent in human effort, even when supported by fervent prayer, collective wisdom, and dedicated intellect.

Here, the church learned to be cautious about the certainty of its own opinions. The Word of God in the hands of human beings, like the word kept in the hearts of the disciples (John 17:6), becomes effective only when joined with the presence of the indwelling Spirit of God (Acts 2:1–12). The ministry of the Holy Spirit, attending the human pursuit for truth—regardless of how carefully educated those engaged in the search are—will serve the appropriate meaning and application of God’s Word. This refining process in the journey toward responsible research and learning of the Word has taken the church through the painful crucible of ideological conflict. Through that process, helpful and correct approaches for biblical interpretation continue to be refined.

It is significant that Adventist hermeneutics emerged in the context of life, ministry, and sincere study by common people—Bible studies in the barn, prayer meetings in the attic, reflections on meaning, and

⁴ George W. Reid, “Another Look at Adventist Hermeneutics,” *Biblical Research Institute*, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/another-look-adventist-hermeneutics>.

⁵ Gerald Wheeler, *James White: Innovator and Overcomer* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2003), 127.

⁶ George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000).

⁷ Fritz Guy, “Mapping the Past: Exploring the Development of Adventist Theology,” *AT Issue*, September 2002, para. 6, <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/doctrines/au2002conference/guy/guy-past.htm>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

conversations in the field. Today, we should likewise extend our efforts beyond the classroom and the scholar's desk and learn from the application of hermeneutics in the practical context of Christian living.

2. The Theologian Milieu of Adventist Theological Work

What is the context that impacts the Adventist Church member as he or she seeks to understand God and discern His will in a particular life situation? This context is part of the hermeneutic process. "Theology does not exist in the abstract; it is always rooted in a context. Knowledge of that context is part of the theology itself."⁹ Therefore, an Adventist hermeneutic embraces life context in the process of interpreting the Scriptures in theological work.

We affirm that the Bible is the primary source of revelation from God and is normative. In any life situation, we first seek God's will in Scripture. Texts like 2 Tim 3:16, 17; 2 Pet 1:16–21; and Isa 8:20 indicate that the Bible is the most authoritative source of knowledge revealed by God. E. White expresses this foundational belief: "The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed."¹⁰ So as Adventists, we affirm that the Scriptures have a central and authoritative role in the process of discerning God's will for the disciple of Christ and for the church in any given situation.

We would err if we did not recognize, however, that the Bible is central and normative within a mosaic of influences that guide theologians as they search for the will of God in the life of the faith community. As Adventists, we share in the tradition that is enriched by the theological approach known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Although the quadrilateral is attributed by many to Albert Outler, it is true that "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason."¹¹ There is a joining of past revelation in Scripture with the current speaking of the living Christ via the Holy Spirit to believers in the present. Both join in contributing to an appropriate hermeneutic. Thus, hermeneutical work

⁹ Nancy T. Ammerman et al., eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 26.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1948), 4:449.

¹¹ United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 82.

is an “epiphany” that occurs “at the intersection of text, tradition, experience, and human reason.”¹²

Woodrow W. Whidden II sees this framework as a way of keeping the Bible primary when doing theology and yet making the hermeneutic process “participatory”¹³ in nature, which accords well with the principle of the priesthood of all believers. Thus, theology is not solely the bailiwick of scholars but also of pastors and church members living their daily lives participating in this quest to understand who God is and His will for His people.

We do not intend to diminish the role of scholars who specialize in theology and biblical interpretation; their contribution is vital. But it is equally important to affirm that the pastor and the members in the local churches are doing important theological work by examining and applying what the Bible says to real-world problems in life. Everyone is called to engage in a meaningful hermeneutic process, and all believers are equipped by the Holy Spirit for that work.

3. The Role of Life in Hermeneutic Work

The destination of all spiritual “meaning-making” in God’s Word is the application of Christian values by the believer in the context of life.¹⁴ Whether the study of the Word is done by an accomplished academic or a disciple of Christ bereft of the benefit of formal education, the intended outcome is the transformation of self and others toward the ideal image of God. “Biblical interpretation, therefore, presupposes a spirit of humility and includes the conviction that the Bible must be accessible to both the educated and the uneducated. The Bible was not given only to the scholars of the church but rather to ‘all the saints’ (Eph 3:16–19).”¹⁵ Thus, scholarly activity is not

¹² Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 40.

¹³ Woodrow W. Whidden II, “*Sola Scriptura*, Inerrantist Fundamentalism, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is ‘No Creed but the Bible’ a Workable Solution?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35.2 (1997): 218.

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, “Doing and Interpreting: An Examination of the Relationship between Theory and Practice in Latin American Liberation Theology,” *Themelios* 8.3 (1983): 11–19.

¹⁵ Hans K. LaRondelle and Jon Paulien, *The Bible Jesus Interpreted: Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* (Loma Linda, CA: Jon Paulien, 2014), 16. Emphasis original.

an end in itself but rather a contribution to the process of reflection and belief formation that produces Christian life.

All believers in Christ continually consult Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in meaning-making in life. However, a Christian disciple, absorbed in the daily demands of life, may fail to define and nurture the reflective process. Further, these sources of consultation must be in continual tension. Tradition, reason, and experience are influenced by culture and inherited tendencies that often counter the will of God (Rom 7:14–16). We cannot deny that we approach the Word with these influences engaged, consciously or not. Commitment to the Word often requires the believer to reexamine one or all three—reason, tradition, and experience.

People do not always follow a linear process in making meaning in their lives. Rather, they engage in an internal conversation to form an interpretation of meaning in a given situation. The vocabulary of those internal conversations emerges from the mix of culture, social norms, and formal education. Karl E. Weick refers to this process as one of forming soliloquies that define our cognition and lead our decisions.¹⁶ Therefore, the intentional inclusion of Scripture to evaluate these conversations is essential for the development of a hermeneutic conscience.

Every disciple should experience the formation of a sound hermeneutic conscience as part of a healthy discipling process. A hermeneutic conscience informs every relationship, every ministry, and all on which Christian disciples place hand or heart. Howard Hendricks supports this concept as follows: “I am committed to training people who can learn for themselves, who do their own decision making, their own problem solving, their own creative thinking, their own biblical interpretation. I want them to learn not only what, not only why, but how.”¹⁷ For this reason, it is essential that the hermeneutic principles guiding the interpretation of the Word are not limited to formal exegesis and scholarship but intentionally directed to the endpoint of forming the hermeneutic conscience that operates in the background of every believer’s daily life.

Creating and educating the hermeneutic conscience requires the discipline of applying and practicing a consistent hermeneutic in the context of life. It is not only built under the influence of the Holy Spirit on an original commitment to the inspired Word of God but also extends beyond the text

¹⁶ See Karl E. Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979) and Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Oxford: Wiley, 2001) for the development of the notion of sense-making as both personal and organizational psychological processes.

¹⁷ Howard Hendricks, “What Makes Christian Education Distinct,” *Christianity Today*, 19 July 2006, para. 1, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/churchhomeleadership/060719.html?start=4>.

to embrace the presence of the Holy Spirit in all applications of Christian life.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit interprets the text in the process of life. Life's context is an essential aspect of God-given inspiration.

Emulating the being and doing of our Savior requires sound understanding of how to apply the Word of God without compromising its intrinsic intent. This, when optimized, enables the believer to not only honor the verity of the Word but also to transform the context in which it is lived out. The radical merging of cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities in this recently globalized planet requires every disciple of Christ to be equipped to practice and teach the Word effectively in radically different contexts—frequently in the same congregation or community.¹⁹

Promoting a sound hermeneutic is thus more than a tool for unpacking the meaning of the Bible, it is an essential part of the process of discipleship. Equipping and teaching every disciple of Christ by educating and developing the hermeneutic conscience must be a primary objective in the process of growing a healthy faith community.²⁰

4. Defining the Hermeneutic Principle “God in Life”

We have chosen to call this hermeneutic principle “God in life.” Clearly defined, this is a hermeneutic of positioning Scripture as the starting point in a *reflective process* that integrates the text with reason; traditions of faith; and experience in seeking to know God, His will, and how we are to make sense of the issues of life, keeping Scripture as normative. This is the hermeneutic work expected of every believer in Christ.

Understanding and practicing the principle is essential to Christian discipleship because one cannot experience a vital relationship with Christ, or make sense of life, through arid intellectualism, reliance on religious institutions to interpret life, or exclusive dependence on the hermeneutical work of scholars. Scripture creates a tension that makes us aware of the need for change, and a follower of Christ must make choices in the present reality, not only in regard to actions but in matters of perspective and faith. Faith is lived out in the current situation and requires application of this hermeneutic principle in a reflective process.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See LaRondelle and Paulien, *The Bible Jesus Interpreted*.

²⁰ Volf, “Doing and Interpreting,” 11–19.

One's competence in applying the principle is strengthened as it is acknowledged, understood, and practiced. To neglect this hermeneutic principle in deference to hermeneutical approaches that distance the struggle with Scripture from the believer erodes the faith life of a disciple and the church. The "God in life" hermeneutic principle is a competency every believer must develop and practice if his or her faith is to survive, indeed if faith is to be passed from generation to generation.

It seems contradictory that while biblical theology has advanced in the academy, it has weakened in the church, if we understand the church as those who believe and live for Christ in society. We suffer this malady in part because the church has too often assigned this work to the domain of professional theologians. Hermeneutics has become distanced from life. This needs to change. The academy needs to prepare pastors who in turn equip people for their hermeneutic challenges. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson describe the task:

Despite assumptions to the contrary, the pastoral office retains the burden of the church's theological leadership, regardless of the vocational context of professional theologians and scholars. Or to say it again, the burden of maintaining the theological and ethical integrity of the people of God isn't evidently linked to an *office within the church*, nor to a *group of people with intellectual gifting*. In so far as pastors bear the day-to-day burden of teaching and leading God's people, they simply *are* the theological leaders of the church.²¹

The primary work of a theological seminary as it pertains to preparing people for ministry is the equipping of persons to nurture this competency within every believer. Pastors help people discover and apply a hermeneutic conscience in their daily life. It follows then that the work of scholarship in a theological seminary begins with spirituality; proceeds to biblical understanding; considers the traditions of the church; and extends to the arts of reflection, reasoning, critical thinking, observations regarding human experience, and communication.²²

It is the tendency of scholars to reduce the task of learning to what can be best managed in literature and research and passed on as knowledge in a classroom context. We wish to make our purpose clear; this principle, God in life, constitutes *the* theological work that provides meaning-making for

²¹ Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 57. Emphases original.

²² See Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997) esp. 46, 47. Nancy T. Ammerman discusses the process of forming legitimacy through the integration of scriptural narratives with a life situation. Ammerman talks about such legitimacy contributing to personal survival, cognition, values, and change.

a Christian disciple in daily life. There is no substitute. *The core competency of Christian discipleship is a reflective process grounded in Scripture that thoroughly integrates reason, traditions of faith, and experience with the holy writ while seeking to know God, His will for our lives, and how we are to make sense of life in our situation.*

This assertion is not an affront to biblical truth. Rather, it anticipates that biblical truth will transform life and culture. One cannot apply the “God in life” hermeneutic principle without affirming that Scripture reshapes, even transforms, present experience and the culture in which we live. This hermeneutic makes it impossible to treat the Bible as somehow distance from transforming life and ministry.

This hermeneutic of reflection presses one to abandon simple proof-text solutions in a life situation. However, a hermeneutic conscience means one considers the revelation of God in the sacred text and how that impacts the tension created in culture and life situations.²³ It includes a careful and thoughtful seeking of God’s presence and hearing of the Spirit speaking in the present. It means respectful consideration of the experience and the traditions formed by those who have walked the path of faith in the past. It means Spirit-led reasoning. Stated simply, hermeneutic conscience is Spirit-led sense-making in life.

We need to emphasize at this point that “God in life” is not a random process. This is a hermeneutic principle. Its application requires discipline and practice. It reshapes the devotional life and requires consistency amidst everyday situations and issues: from domestic life in the nuclear family; to relationships; to issues like violence in society, human sexuality, or responses to poverty. Christians must intentionally form the practice of applying the hermeneutic in their lives—to interpret and apply Scripture when a particular situation arises, to listen carefully to God, and to discover His will in the current context.

There are a number of examples in the OT and the NT where we see the “God in life” principle at work. When David approached the priest at Nob (1 Sam 21), he requested to eat bread. Ahimelech had consecrated bread that was to be eaten by priests alone. David, from the tribe of Judah, was not eligible to partake of it (Lev 24:8, 9). Yet Ahimelech considered the biblical mandate to care for the needs of the hungry and decided to violate the letter of the Word of God and gave the holy bread to David. The priest did not ignore the words of Scripture; he considered the circumstances, and

²³ For an explanation of the idea of trajectory as a hermeneutic approach seeking to locate various voices in the text and integrate them into a progressive trajectory that adds meaning to spiritual life in the present day, see Henry A. Virkler and Karellynne Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 202–4.

using reason, experience, and tradition, he decided that the best meaning of the text in this situation was to hand the bread to David. Jesus affirmed this as the correct interpretation (Matt 12:3, 4).

When Christ was tempted in the wilderness, He had to interpret the Bible based on His current circumstances. When Satan placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple, he quoted Ps 91:11, 12, encouraging Him to trust in God's protection. But the context made the act of jumping presumptuous; therefore, Christ used Scripture (Deut 6:16) to shape His response. Jesus was practicing hermeneutics when He analyzed the two texts in light of the current situation.

The early church had to struggle with the meaning of the biblical injunction that males who became members of Israel had to be circumcised (Gen 17:12; Exod 12:48; Acts 15). Though the Bible and tradition pointed toward circumcising male converts, reason and experience indicated a different meaning. The conversion of uncircumcised gentiles who received the Holy Spirit and were baptized (Acts 10:44–48) led the church to conclude that God did not require circumcision of gentile believers.

The "God in life" principle helps to move us beyond naive literalism in the face of the many and complex challenges of life. The Bible does not address every possible set of circumstances (i.e., smoking). Ralph G. Warnock asserts that "*sola scriptura* never solved a political problem or negated the need to wrestle and work through the communal and continuing dance of hermeneutical assessment, theological engagement, and ethical discernment."²⁴ So the "God in life" principle leads us to reflect, struggle, think critically, and dialogue until we come to a Spirit-led decision emerging from Scripture integrated with tradition, reason, and experience.

5. Applying the Hermeneutic Principle "God in Life": A Methodology

The "God in life" hermeneutic principle first requires of a Christian to live his or her life continually in the presence of God. One cannot do the hermeneutical work faithfully apart from authentic biblical spirituality. "We must first believe before we know."²⁵ This means a life immersed in prayer and devotions and in the study of the Bible and an orientation toward making every decision based on the will of God. The principle requires the primary

²⁴ Ralph G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 143.

²⁵ This is a quote of Augustine as provided in Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 23.

work of listening and seeking God's voice in our situation, in our hermeneutic conscience, and in the tension we experience between the ideal and the real.

Second, when faced with daily decisions or crisis created by tensions between the ideal and the real in either his or her personal life or in the congregation, the believer builds on his or her relationship with Christ. Going to Scripture, the disciple seeks to make sense of what is happening and create meaning so that a healthy response can be crafted and applied. This step means we do not resort to proof texting or authoritative exhortations from respected, even revered, sources. A disciple studies, prayerfully seeking God's guidance, and deeply feels the responsibility of choices in his or her reality.

With the Word of God as the center, reason, experience, and tradition are consulted. The "God in life" hermeneutic principle provides an epistemology that requires keeping reason, tradition, and experience in tension with the sacred text. Thus, thoughtful examination of other Christian literature is one appropriate stage in the hermeneutic process.

Does this mean that in advocating the "God in life" hermeneutic principle, the concept of *sola Scriptura* is contradicted? No. True, *sola Scriptura* has varied perspectives in the view of various voices. This hermeneutic means that God does move in the hearts and experience of His followers during life, and their reflections provide illumination for others in their particular situation. However, in this hermeneutic, Scripture remains the starting point, the center, and a reference point that withstands contradiction.

The hermeneutic process is not a solo act. The community of believers reason together, often blessed by the contributions of a teaching pastor, and engage in this hermeneutic process to discern the will of God for their time, place, and circumstances. So, the individual narratives of each member, the community narratives of the body, and even the counter-narratives are used by God to indicate the best path forward.

Paul Ricœur²⁶ addresses this phenomenon as "distanciation." He asserts that the world of the text provides a narrative meant to make contact with the world of the reader. To confine the meaning of the text solely to that of the author can create a problem for hermeneutic processes that are limited to discovering the intent of the writer in their world. Inspiration speaks to

²⁶ Paul Ricœur suggests language as the carrier of metaphor. He sees metaphor as a creative utterance providing meaning for a world freed from the present time of the writer. See, for example, Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (New York: Routledge, 2003), 114. Walter Brueggemann also asserts the future world application of the biblical text. Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

a proposed world. Captivation with the words or world of the biblical writer, while helpful, also risks losing meaning for the proposed world. The task of a community at any given time is to understand the text in light of God's will for the world of their time and being. As Ricœur states it, "To interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text."²⁷

Rather than the image of a lone leader on the mountain, who ascertains the will of God then returns to inform the people, we are blessed by an inclusive metaphor. The scholar in the seminary, the pastoral leader, and the member of the church all need to engage in the "God in life" hermeneutic principle to discern the will of God. No one can claim the final answer as his or her own; it belongs to the body of Christ. The community process itself contributes to a helpful tension in our inquiry for the will of God. Within this biblical metaphor, we see the church as a living organism blessed by the breath of God's Spirit providing a common voice as we struggle with meaning-making in everyday life.

Seeking meaning in the diverse faith traditions of the Christian community is a path to understanding that requires caution, but one that should not be ignored. Careful reflection on the unique traditions of others requires searching reflection that can bring our own traditions into focus and encourage consistency with God's will. It can reveal positions that may be the product of legitimate consideration by the faith community in a certain time and place and differ between communities in a different time and place, while not violating Scripture. This step in the hermeneutic process ensures that we do not resolve questions in the tensions of our reality with a simplistic "because that is what the church teaches." The hermeneutics requires engagement from all believers and limits lifeless institutionalism.

The application of reflection and critical thinking (reasoning) to the present life situation (experience) is a necessary function of understanding. Context impacts meaning. The Creator crafted us with intellect that allows for reasoning and analysis. We have capacity to consider multiple factors in a life situation while giving committed weight to the authority of the Bible and collectively, led by God, come to a determination that honors both context and the Word. Failure to exercise this reasoning results in spiritual atrophy.

Maintaining the tension of meaning and life situation requires tolerance of some uncertainty that is best mitigated by the realities of a collective decision. The counsel of Matt 18:17 regarding the fate of the offending brother cannot reasonably be borne by one person but can be absorbed by the

²⁷ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 86. Emphasis original.

collective decision of the church in determining guilt or innocence (Matt 18:18–20). In the same way, challenging situations can be met by a community decision regarding meaning and in congruence with the Word while maintaining an appropriate tension between the two.

Living out individual and community discipleship guided by the principle “God in life” allows for the spiritual growth of both. Life situations cry out for an explanation—meaning. For the Christian, that meaning must be congruent with the character, the will, and the Word of God. Facing those challenges produces strength and maturity. Disciples of Christ are thus developed by the ever-present Spirit who guides us through the challenging situations of daily life, while teaching and reminding us of the wisdom contained within God’s sacred Word (John 14:26).

6. Conclusion

We have proposed a hermeneutic principle—God in life. The principle assumes that hermeneutics is a process through which a person seeks to understand God and His will for our lives. We assert that hermeneutics is essential for the daily life of all who would follow Christ. Grounded in Scripture, the principle engages spirituality, traditions of faith, reason, and experience in the tensions that emerge between the ideal and the real. This is the work of wisdom.

The epistemological task of discerning the will of God is essential to being a follower of Jesus. John Swinton, Clive Marsh, and Harriet Mowat describe the task of knowing as a hermeneutical one: acknowledging *hermeneutical* insight in human experience, integrating multiple ways of knowing together and rigorous *critical* engagement, and relating to the witness of Scripture.²⁸

As a movement of faith and gathering of those who have responded to God’s call, the church is weakened when hermeneutics is positioned as an elite activity of scholars in the academic community. The subsequent distancing of hermeneutic work is natural but hinders discipleship in public life. What is evident is that the very act of narrowing the definition of hermeneutics to a scholarly interaction with the text, while intending to contribute to the community of faith, actually weakens faith. It does so because it removes the hermeneutic responsibility from the disciple in his or her daily life. We do affirm the scholarly community in its role of contributing to the understanding of the God’s inspired Word, but we assert that the

²⁸ John Swinton, Clive Marsh, and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 76–77.

academic community is charged to do so while mentoring the development of the capacity for hermeneutic work in every believer.

"God in life" as a hermeneutic principle is integrated with daily spiritual practices that nurture spirituality. One *cannot* discern God within Scripture without the accompanying presence of the Holy Spirit. Any hermeneutic that approaches Scripture as a mere piece of classic literature is limited. The "God in life" hermeneutic principle necessarily engages one in reflection. Respect for the traditions of faith, combined with reason, discernment, and experience merges with the counsel of others as we seek to live a Christian life. Interpretation flows out of the application of these sources in the present experience. Often, the experience itself reveals God's character and will. "God in life" requires daily, disciplined application of this collection of resources.

Scripture is alive. In the light ushering in each new day or the darkness heralding every approaching night, humanity may hear the Word of God. The living Word brings meaning to the present moment of life. In love and in hate, in caring and in selfishness, in belief and in doubt, in right and in wrong, God speaks to those who will hear. It is the hermeneutic "God in life," the work of wisdom.