

# The Divisiveness of Theology

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Before discussing the divisiveness of theology we have to define theology. D. F. Wright understands it as “teaching about God and his relation to the world from creation to the consummation, particularly as it is set forth in an ordered, coherent manner.”<sup>1</sup> Along these lines we would suggest that in order to gain knowledge about God and enter into a relationship with him it is necessary to be engaged in theological thinking, that is, to look at and study what God has revealed to humanity. Doing theology is a privilege and an ongoing process which may lead those involved to an ever deeper understanding and greater appreciation of God and salvation and a vibrant relationship with Him. Ideally, theological thinking is not only done in isolation, but all believers are involved in this process, even though the church has employed specialists, who have been trained in theology and biblical studies.

## The Problem of Doing Theology

Yet it is no secret that theology—whether done by church members, church administrators or professional theologians/scholars—has the potential to create tensions. It may even be divisive. Doing theology and coming to certain convictions on which one acts may fracture human relationships, bring about disunity, and polarize or even split churches and society.

This can be substantiated by a look at history and our present world situation. The Arian controversy in the fourth century A.D. dealing with the divinity of Christ and the Trinity left victors and those who were defeated. The birth of Protestantism came about by a return to Scripture and an intense seeking for God and led to a break-away from the Catholic Church which started the counter-reformation. The Anabaptists disagreed on certain doctrines with the Roman Church as well as with Protestantism and were persecuted by both groups. Acting on theological convictions has fragmented Christianity into numerous denominations.

But even in the NT one finds theological tensions. Following the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), conflict arose between some groups clinging to the Mosaic law, including circumcision, and others teaching that Gentile Christians are not generally bound by that law. Behind the debated issue loomed the larger one, namely salvation by faith in Christ or salvation through the observation of the law (Gal 2-5). This conflict helped the church to define more clearly its biblical position. However, not always was the outcome positive. “Disputes as to meanings quickly gave rise to separations and schisms within the Christian community. This is already apparent in the books of the NT, especially the epistles, in which theological argumentation is deployed in order to distinguish between truth and error . . .”<sup>2</sup> For instance, the Johannine letters inform us about different perceptions of who Jesus was and the battle of the apostle for the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 2 and 4; 2 John). In this case, theology had become divisive but the apostles did not pull back in order to please the opponents and strike a compromise. Heresy had to be confronted by theology, even if it meant that false positions had to be exposed and a split of the church might possibly follow.

Today, there are not only enormous tensions between world religions; but also within each of the three monotheistic religions, namely Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Even within most of their denominations these tensions are manifest and can erupt in strange decisions or even violent acts against those who hold different theological positions. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI’s decision to readmit to the official Roman Catholic Church, among others, the ultraconservative bishop Richard Williamson, who denies the extent of the Holocaust, has not only complicated the church’s relations with the Jews and caused criticism from leading figures in the arena of politics, it has also led people to leave the Catholic Church in disappointment.

W. Jeanrond points to the spectrum of current theological methods and asks the question: “Can there be any claim to unity when there is no unified framework of communication?”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to its potential divisiveness, Andrew Linzey points out other dangers associated with doing theology: Theology, which is a human enterprise, may not only claim too little, at times it may also claim too much, such as theological fundamentalism which “absolutizes human agency, authority, or creed above that of God.”<sup>4</sup> A third danger is parochialism. Although theology should serve the needs of the church, service must not become servility. “. . . this service slides into servility if it becomes bound to the maintenance of religious or Christian positions *per se* rather than to the seeking out of God’s truth.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Options for Doing Theology**

If doing theology can be problematic and even divisive, how should we relate to it? There are a number of options, though some may not be realistic:

1. Refrain from doing theology and get involved in a kind of spirituality that avoids doctrinal concerns or in practical issues such as mission outreach, humanitarian aid, or care for our ecosystem.
2. Leave theologians free rein.<sup>6</sup> Assign doing theology to the specialists only and allow them to use whatever hermeneutical approach they see fit.
3. Allow the leadership of the church to make decisions by using administrative processes with little or no theological input.
4. Encourage all groups of the church to become involved in studying Scripture and doing theology and keep a balanced approach in which all are listened to and decision making is not left in the hands of a few individuals only.

The advantage of the first option is that something is being done and Christianity is kept down-to-earth. People do not get stuck in never-ending debates about non-essential theological minutia. The disadvantage of this approach is that spirituality and practice may not have a solid biblical foundation and that what is being proclaimed and/or experienced deteriorates into emotionalism, traditionalism, relativism or pragmatism and falls short of being the biblical message. How can believers stop thinking about God and studying his Word that helps them fine-tune their involvement with humanity, evaluate their methods and the outcome of their labor, and gain new insights?

The advantage of the second option is that trained specialists are dealing with important theological concepts. They are aware of the challenges posed by culture, the biblical material, and the various interpretations or theological positions on the subject matter, and they can deal with the issues in a responsible way. Some would regard it as an advantage that average church members and administrators would not have to get involved in the interpretation of Scripture and in theological thinking in a deeper way. But this very point turns out to be a great loss and disadvantage. Accepting option two would hand over to theologians and biblical scholars the sole responsibility for doing theology and rob God’s people of exercising their divinely given privilege as a universal priesthood of believers to share in the wonderful task of doing theology. Although theologians and biblical scholars are trained in their fields, they are neither infallible nor free from the temptations to follow current theological fashions, to submit to the majority view in the scholarly world, or to subscribe to philosophical presuppositions for studying Scripture that are questionable from a biblical perspective.

Option three asks church administrators to make decisions without theological input from others, i.e., to make decisions on pragmatic rather than theological bases. The advantage of this approach resembles the advantage of option one. It may even seem to be an effective approach. Decisions can be made quickly. Administrators may be able to stem the tide of heresy with which the church is always wrestling. But the price is quite high.<sup>7</sup> Although it may be a fast process, the results may not stand the test of time and may even lead in a wrong direction and not be owned by the church. Such an approach may be an attempt to tame theology. But who says that church administrators are automatically right, while the church’s

theologians are automatically wrong and must be treated with suspicion? If important decisions are made without the input of the theologians and scholars of the church, the danger is that sooner or later decisions will no longer be based on biblical teachings and the church will become a business enterprise with the president mutating into a CEO. Secular methods and practices may be used and dissenting opinions may be shunned. Another danger is that administrators might avoid making any decisions on theological matters and opt for a smorgasbord of opinions within the Church that could cripple or even hinder the proclamation of the church's message and the carrying out of its mission.

The fourth alternative has the disadvantage that many believers may not be interested in participating in a common theological journey.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the process is long and more cumbersome, and a mere majority vote may not be the solution to all problems. However, the disadvantages are outweighed by allowing the entire church to get involved, thereby avoiding oligarchic or autocratic church governance. It may also contribute to a feeling of ownership.

Among the options listed here (and there may be more) the fourth seems to be the most desirable one, since it comes the closest to biblical teachings on the nature of the church. This may also be the traditional position among Adventists. To do no theology can hardly be an option for Adventists. To assign theology to trained personnel is not much better. The same is true of assigning all power to church leadership. If, therefore, we cannot avoid doing theology but, to the contrary, must get involved, the questions are, What is the price? and How do we do this in a responsible way, especially since the divisiveness of theology is sometimes necessary and good and sometimes unnecessary and harmful?

### **The Price of Doing Theology**

So what is the price to pay for doing theology? Doing theology requires:

- the willingness of the individual to get involved in this learning experience.
- time, prayer, study, living out one's convictions, and some training which is provided by the Adventist Church, for instance through Bible study classes on Sabbath morning, Bible study groups during the week, and various seminars on church and conference levels.
- an individual and yet also a communal approach, because, as Christians, we are not islands, unconnected to others but part of Christ's body, the church.
- acceptance of certain paradoxes in Scripture without attempting to solve them: for instance that there is one God, and yet three persons in the Godhead; we are already saved and yet not finally saved.
- at times be willing to suspend judgment and live with certain questions. For this, humility and modesty are needed.<sup>9</sup> We do not know everything, not even all that is knowable. However, we do understand the answers to the crucial questions of life given us by Scripture and that these answers are trustworthy and reliable.
- acknowledgment that opinions on the interpretation of some biblical passages and theological topics may differ among church members and theologians which, however, do not call into question Adventist fundamental beliefs. Examples are the interpretation of difficult apocalyptic passages such as Daniel 11 and whether Jesus had Adam's pre-fall nature, post-fall nature or a combination of both.
- recognition that some theological tensions need to be addressed because they rise to a serious level that may lead, if left unresolved, to a fundamental change of the Church's position and to open conflict. Examples of such issues are the Church's position on creation as opposed to theistic evolution and the issue of homosexual practice. Some matters are secondary and can be left alone, at least for the time being.

Summing up what we have said thus far, tensions seem to be unavoidable when people get into theology. Yet for believers not to think theologically is not a desirable option either. We cannot worship God and *not*

reflect on him. Working and thinking, spirituality and theology are not opposed to each other; ideally they go together.

Theological tensions may not necessarily be wrong, if there is a willingness to work them out and find biblical solutions. It is not a sign of a weak or lifeless church to have an ongoing theological dialogue.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, it may suggest healthy engagement with matters of faith. It would be disastrous for administrators to stifle all discussion on theological matters, not to allow questions to be raised about the reasons for our positions, or not to appreciate the need for better and more comprehensive interpretations of biblical passages and of our theological teachings, preferring to focus instead solely on practical matters.

On the other hand, unnecessary theological conflict may cripple and paralyze the Church and produce different factions. As the early church had to fight heresies that went against the Word of God, so the church of our days has to confront teachings that cannot be substantiated by Scripture. When confronted with false teachings about major biblical doctrines, Jesus, Paul, and the apostles were clearly divisive by not allowing for pluralism within the church (Matt 10:34-36; Gal 1:8-9). While some discussion on theological matters is normal and healthy, promulgation of outright heresy must be rejected. This is where apologetics as a theological discipline comes in and has its rightful place (Phil 1:16; 1 Pet 3:15).<sup>11</sup> As Gordon R. Lewis writes, “if knowledge is necessary to faith then defense of truth is ‘indispensable to Christian outreach.’”<sup>12</sup>

Doing theology is important for the life and the mission of the church and should never be abandoned. “Even in God’s kingdom there will no doubt be more to learn. Some have envisioned heaven as endless school without the pain of quizzes and exams.”<sup>13</sup> But there is a price to pay. This price is to live with certain tensions, to continue listening to each other, and to defend biblical truth.

## **Doing Theology and the Adventist Church**

### **1. Suggestions of a General Nature**

The question is not whether or not there will be theological tensions but how to deal with them and how to do theology in a responsible way within the Adventist Church, trying to avoid unnecessary tensions. Here are some general suggestions:

***Stay away from the extremes.*** Just as it is not helpful to stress theology and disregard Christian life, it is equally not helpful to stress practice and downplay theology. Both the ivory tower of theology as well as pure pragmatism has to be shunned. In some circles it has become commonplace to make negative remarks about theology. “Every so often,” writes Roy Adams, “at camp meetings and other gatherings, one can hear demagogic aspersions of theology: ‘We don’t need theology,’” a speaker might say. ‘All we need is Jesus!’ Uttered with passion and conviction, the comment usually brings choruses of amens, if not also applause.”<sup>14</sup> Such an approach may have a negative affect on church members. Leaders have lamented that Adventists can no longer be regarded as Jesus’ people of the Book. Commenting negatively on doing theology may discourage church members from studying Scripture for themselves and thinking about matters of faith, leading them to assume that it is not important. Even a comparison of theology to the “weightier” matters of practical Christian living may send a wrong message. On the other hand, those interested in theology may continue their studies and distance themselves from those who make negative remarks about theology. This also can contribute to a polarization within the church. Adams suggests: “As practical as life itself, it’s [theology that] keeps us from being tomfooled or manipulated by the misguided and the unscrupulous. It forms the bedrock upon which we anchor everything else.”<sup>15</sup>

***Do not compartmentalize.*** The Bible does not separate sound teaching from the Christian life and walk. The apostles stressed growth in knowledge (Phil 1:9; Col 1:9-10; 2 Pet 3:18) which has cognitive and relational aspects. We need to avoid creating dichotomies between theology and practice or spirituality,<sup>16</sup> doctrines and mission, theologians and administrators, those with formal training in theology and those without formal training.

Mutual respect allows people to flourish, feel appreciated, and be creative. Persons who are labeled may feel rejected, bitter, and be unable to reach their full potential.

**Affirm both theology and the Christian life.** The *doing* of theology is as essential as its *practice* (mission outreach, caring relationships, humanitarian assistance, etc.). Theology forms the foundation. Practice builds on this foundation. One without the other will not do. It is true that theology can be wrong and destructive,<sup>17</sup> but so can practical approaches. Questionable approaches to theology or practice do not permit us to discard one or both of them. Instead they encourage us to do it right. We must affirm both theology and practice. Adams writes: “The speaker who gets up on the platform *wearing theology for all to see* turns me off. But the speaker who stands there, axe in hand, murdering theology, kills me too.”<sup>18</sup>

**Do Not Shortcut Theological Differences by Reverting to Power.** While outright heresy must be dealt with and, in the long-run, may need to be removed from the body of Christ, dialogue should take place first. It should not be assumed that a certain office makes the office-bearer quasi-infallible. The early church did not handle theological disagreement by just turning to ecclesiastical power. Such an approach was used later and prepared the way for a strict hierarchical system of church governance and the papacy.

## 2. More Specific Suggestions

But what would help us more specifically within the Adventist Church to avoid unnecessary tensions and battles?

**Consent to the Adventist framework of doing theology.** This Adventist framework includes:

- accepting the self-testimony of Scripture on divine revelation, inspiration, and biblical authority.
- accepting Scripture as the primary source for theology. Scripture is the measuring rod with which all other sources such as general revelation, extra-biblical prophecy, culture and personal experience are being evaluated.<sup>19</sup>
- being Bible-oriented rather than being purely a philosophical, sociological, psychological or scientific enterprise.<sup>20</sup>
- doing exegesis and theology using methods derived from Scripture and in agreement with its nature.
- doing theology with a definite goal, namely a better understanding of God and his plan of salvation (which can be communicated to others) and a deeper relationship with the Lord. Therefore, Adventist theological thinking is practice-oriented without being pragmatic in the negative sense.<sup>21</sup>
- a Christ-centered theology.<sup>22</sup> All truth must be related to Jesus and the full biblical message accepted.
- theological reflection in the context of the great controversy and with a clear eschatological emphasis.
- systematic theological thinking that describes, analyzes, and organizes biblical doctrines by drawing on the entire Bible. Adventists are not opposed to reasoning. But, while we treasure reason as a gift from God, we also recognize that human reason is fallible and must be sanctified.<sup>23</sup>
- theological thinking that takes into account contemporary questions and challenges and tries to respond to them. Just because culture shapes human beings to a large extent does not mean that Scripture is culturally conditioned and not directly applicable to our situation, at least in most cases.

**Do not concentrate on one theological issue only.** There should be an awareness of the danger of riding theological hobby horses. Be able to distinguish the essentials from the less important or even obscure issues and focus on the former rather than on the latter. Otherwise there is a danger of becoming unbalanced.

**Be tentative with your conclusions.** It is better to submit a “suggestion” and be willing to be corrected rather than to be dogmatic about one’s own insights<sup>24</sup> and to share them widely before others have evaluated them.

**Acknowledge that Adventist theological thinking is not done in isolation.** Results of one's study should be shared with persons of experience to get input. It is of great importance to listen to others carefully and with an open mind.

**Exhibit kindness and a Christlike attitude at all times.** Do not harshly criticize those with whom you disagree and certainly do not mock them, but show kindness and Christian charity. Those who seem to be adversaries need to be taken seriously. Most have certain points that can and should be appreciated.

## Conclusion

While theology is needed, at times it can be unnecessarily divisive. Following the above-mentioned guidelines may be a first step toward a solution of this problem. If those involved in doing theology agree with each other concerning basic presuppositions and methodological approaches to Scripture, the danger of their theologies becoming divisive is considerably reduced. In addition, a good dose of humility and respect for others is desirable. In the Adventist church, decisions on theological matters are not made only by administrators or only by theologians or even by both groups together but by the entire church.<sup>25</sup> We repeat: Theological thinking is a privilege and is a necessary and ongoing process which may lead those involved to an ever deeper understanding and a greater appreciation of God and salvation.

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<sup>1</sup>D. F. Wright, "Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright, and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 680.

<sup>2</sup>S. W. Sykes, "Theology," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 567.

<sup>3</sup>Werner G. Jeanron, "Theological Method," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price; Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1992), 486.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Linzey, "Theology," in *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology, and Society* (ed. Paul Barry Clarke and Andrew Linzey; New York: Routledge, 1996), 820.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>A related suggestion may be to create a small body of scholars and theologians, a kind of magisterium, and let them make all important theological decisions.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. *Understanding Christian Theology* (ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck; Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 1136.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Rice, "Theology as Topical Bible Study," *Spectrum* 29/2 (2001): 64.

<sup>9</sup>Linzey, 820.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Jan Paulsen, "Heavenly Mission of Hope: Christ's Mission Is Our Mission," *Adventist Review*, September 24, 2009, 3.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2003), 172-173.

<sup>12</sup>Gulley, 173.

<sup>13</sup>Rogers E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 611.

<sup>14</sup>Roy Adams, "In a Time of Confusion," *Adventist Review*, November 2000, 19.

<sup>15</sup>Adams, "In a Time of Confusion," 20.

<sup>16</sup>Rice, 69, states: "Theology needs to find ways to get at the experiential connection between belief and life."

<sup>17</sup>Roy Adams, "Grappling With Destiny," *Adventist Review*, April 25, 2002, 24.

<sup>18</sup>Adams, "Grappling With Destiny," 25.

<sup>19</sup>Therefore, we cannot agree with the principle *prima scriptura*, as suggested by Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1999), 137, but uphold *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*. The implications of Guy's approach become more evident on pp. 144, 146.

<sup>20</sup>Ángel Rodríguez, "Doing Theology in the Adventist Church: Role of the Theologian," unpublished paper, February 2003, 7.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 24.

<sup>22</sup>This should not be confused with the Christological principle employed, for example, by Martin Luther.

<sup>23</sup> Cf., Frank Hasel, “Theology and the Role of Reason,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 4/2 (1993): 172-198.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Rodríguez, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Rodríguez, 15.

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