

Hermeneutical Guidelines for Dealing with Theological Questions

By Ekkehardt Mueller

When people ask questions of a biblical or theological nature, it happens that they request as an answer one clear Bible text, a “Thus says the Lord” in order to have the respective issue explained or settled. While it is highly commendable and while it is the Adventist approach to rely on Scripture for deciding theological issues, one cannot always provide a clear-cut Bible text that solves the issue. Therefore, it may be helpful to discuss briefly how to handle theological questions. We do this with a high view of Scripture in mind. That is, we assume the Scripture to be God’s propositional revelation to human beings.

Categories of Questions

When thinking about and working on biblical and/or theological questions one soon realizes that there are different kinds or categories of questions.

Questions on Biblical Texts

First, there are questions that relate to the interpretation of biblical texts or larger biblical passages. Someone wants to understand, for instance, Luke 23:43, a text containing Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross, or the prophecy of Daniel 11.

In such cases, we meticulously study the text and employ exegetical steps that are derived from Scripture.¹ The starting point is clearly a biblical text. The question is not which biblical text(s) to choose but how a biblical text should be interpreted based on a hermeneutical method that accepts the self-testimony of Scripture.

Questions on Biblical Topics

Second, there are thematic questions that deal with how biblical topics should be understood. If, for instance, we would study biblical themes such as the Sabbath or the resurrection of the dead in Scripture, we would search Scripture for the respective terms and related vocabulary, e.g., “Sabbath,” “rest,” “complete rest,” and “to rest.” We would investigate the texts that we have found in their contexts, applying briefly the above mentioned exegetical steps to these texts, and would try to formulate a theology of the respective topic.

Questions on Biblical Concepts

Apart from biblical topics that are based on biblical terms there are topics such as the Trinity, anthropology or eschatology that deal with biblical-theological concepts which cannot directly or at least not exclusively be based on biblical vocabulary.

Dealing with these and similar topics one has to go beyond word searches and explanations and has to investigate and subsequently synthesize various biblical themes and concepts. When we study, for instance, the Trinity, we could take a look at how different terms applied to God are used, investigate Jesus’ and the apostles’ claims that Jesus was divine, ask ourselves how Jesus and the Holy Spirit relate to God the Father in Scripture, consider the notion that God is one, etc. There is no biblical text that says: “There is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” But we believe that this concept is clearly found in the Old and New Testaments.

Questions Not Mentioned in Scripture

Finally, Christians in the centuries following the closing of the canon were and still are confronted with questions of a theological and/or ethical nature that are not directly addressed in Scripture. Some would refer to these questions as the silence of the Word of God. However, this is not an absolute silence. And Adventist fundamental beliefs, which are derived from Scripture are not envisioned here.

Here are some examples of issues not explicitly spelled out in Scripture: Can God die? What happened to Jesus’ divine nature when He died on the cross? Did Jesus die the first or the second death? How should we relate to abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and human cloning? Can Christians today still be involved in one or another form of slavery because the Bible does not clearly prohibit slavery? What about ecology and the care for planet earth? Should we be free to drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, or abuse drugs? There is no biblical prohibition: “You shall not smoke.”

These and similar questions cannot be answered by referring to one or more Bible texts only. There may be no Bible text at all that deals directly with these issues. Nevertheless these questions are important and a number of them directly influence our daily lives. They cannot be ignored.

In other words, some biblical/theological questions are directly related to biblical texts or biblical material and can be answered by straightforward Bible texts, while others cannot.

Different Approaches to Questions that Cannot Be Answered with One or More Biblical Texts

This raises the question of how we should proceed and what we should do in cases where we cannot simply refer to clear-cut Bible texts. What are our options, if we accept Scripture as the Word of God, avoiding critical approaches such as suggestions that Scripture is culturally conditioned, reflects an evolutionary development of religious thought, or is relative in its statements and in its authority? Excluding these approaches, it seems that we still have about four options.

What Scripture Does Not Prohibit Is Allowed

One approach would be: What Scripture does not prohibit is allowed. Such an approach would mean that if Scripture does not address a specific issue directly, Christians are free to proceed in whichever direction they want to go. Some would limit this freedom somewhat and would claim that under prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit the church rather than the individual should make decisions on issues not directly addressed in Scripture.

Let us take, for instance, church structure. The Bible does not tell us precisely how a worldwide church should be structured. We have no texts that spell out that we should have Conferences, Unions, Divisions, and the General Conference or how much authority should rest with leaders on various levels of church administration. Would an Episcopal, Presbyterian or a Congregational type of church governance be more profitable? On the other hand, if the principle “What is not prohibited is allowed” is true, would we be free to take narcotic drugs and get involved in gambling and pornography?

This and the following approach were already discussed early in church history. J. P.

Lewis writes:

Tertullian was concerned about whether a Christian could wear a laurel wreath. While the opposition argued “whatever is not forbidden is certainly permitted,” Tertullian contended “whatever is not clearly permitted is forbidden.” It would be overplaying the evidence, however, to assume that Tertullian applied his contention consistently to all matters of faith and practice of the church.²

He continued to say:

... Luther considered that “What Scripture has neither commended nor prohibited had to be considered ‘free’ and dealt with accordingly.” Luther had not attempted to eliminate the elevation of the Host or the use of eucharistic vestments. When Karlstadt asked, “Where has Christ commanded us to elevate the Host and exhibit it to the people?” Luther’s reply was, “Where has he forbidden it?” Luther stated, “As for the Mass, where has Christ forbidden elevation? The Pope transgresses when he commands it, and the sectaries when they forbid it.”³

Luther talked about the “adiaphora,” things about which Scripture—and, by extension, God—is indifferent.⁴ This approach is also called the “normative principle,” adopted, for instance, by the Anglicans.⁵

What Scripture Does Not Allow Is Prohibited

A second approach would be: What Scripture does not explicitly allow, is forbidden. This approach could mean that, for instance, we may have to live like the Amish people and avoid electricity and all modern means of transportation and communication because they are not mentioned in Scripture. Scripture does not address advances in science and medicine that influence our daily life. Can we have a CAT scan or an MRI, an organ transplant or reading glasses? Again, what about the structure of the Adventist Church and its different departments? Should we eliminate Conferences, Unions, Divisions, and the General Conference because none of these entities are listed and therefore not directly allowed in Scripture? What do we do as a church with schools and hospitals, publishing houses, and health food industries? Should we ban organs in the churches—as Calvinists did at first—or PA systems?⁶ All of these are not explicitly referred to in Scripture,

and there are many more examples that could be enumerated. One could argue that Scripture regulates religious life and not secular life. However, such a distinction is not directly made in the Bible.

As already stated, the issue was-discussed in the first centuries and came up again with Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. For Zwingli “all was to be simple. Scripture ought explicitly to sanction whatever was done in the service, though there was an area of ‘things indifferent’ such as the wording of the prayers. What was not authorized was to be rejected.”⁷ And according to Calvin: “Nothing is safer than to banish all the boldness of human sense, and adhere solely to what Scripture teaches.”⁸

Thomas Campbell of the Restoration Movement stated “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.”⁹ This sounds very good and is certainly sincere. However, W. Woodrow shows that Campbell was not able to stick to his own principle:

Unfortunately, Campbell often used the same logic to exclude one practice and include another. . . . Campbell justified many items for which there was neither command nor example under the ‘law of expediency’: meetinghouses; baptistries, the translation, publication, and distribution of Scripture, times of convocation; and specific arrangements for the Lord’s day, etc. . . . Campbell spoke favorably of capital punishment, concluding there is not a “word in Old Testament or New inhibiting” its usage. The institution of slavery is not of itself immoral since there “is not one verse in the Bible inhibiting it.” Elsewhere Campbell conceded, “God having prescribed no one form of political government has equally sanctioned every form which society chooses to assume.” Since the apostles gave no specific directions regarding the manner of church cooperation, this is “left to the wisdom and discretion of the whole community.” It should be noted that the context in which Biblical silence was prohibitive for Campbell generally involved some aspect of the church—its form of government, worship, or terms of communion. . . . Since the New Testament presented all essential features of the church, extra-Scriptural elements lacked Biblical authorization, violated the divinely given pattern, and impeded the cause of Christian unity. Silence in this context was prohibitory. However, since Scripture specified no exact procedure for carrying out the essentials, silence in these areas implied freedom.¹⁰

Restorationists may have failed to see that not all church situations in the NT were alike and therefore in some cases various options existed. For example, Jewish Christians still worshiped in the temple and the synagogue, while Gentile Christians met in house churches modeled after the synagogue but did not meet in the temple. Restorationists may have also failed to distinguish between biblical narratives and biblical prescriptions. In other words: they may not have been able to make a distinction between what the Bible reports and what the Bible prescribes. In any case, Woodrow notes:

. . . this does not mean that any word or act which does not specifically appear in Scripture is inharmonious with or antithetical to Scripture . . . While the mention of one practice in the New Testament contradicts (in the sense of being different from) another, it does not on that basis make the latter practice wrong or sinful . . . For Christians to commemorate the Lord’s Supper by fasting would be ludicrous; however, the institution of the Supper does not preclude fasting as a valid expression of worship simply because they contradict or differ.¹¹

This second approach is also called the “regulative” approach and was followed by the Puritans.¹²

Choosing the Two Aforementioned Approaches Simultaneously

A third approach would be to pick and choose between the two approaches just introduced or to find a mediating position. A church member may argue that it is not a problem to watch TV because what the Bible does not prohibit is allowed; and the very same person may argue that Scripture does not allow for candles or flowers in the sanctuary because what the Bible does not allow is prohibited.

Although this may sound strange, such an approach can be encountered with Adventist church members, pastors, and administrators. However, it is also found throughout church history, because typically persons espousing the latter approach were not able to apply it consistently. This is true for reformers as well as Restorationists.¹³

Karlstadt, Luther’s colleague but later his opponent at Wittenberg, expressed the principle of adding nothing to Scripture. . . . Anyone who adds to or subtracts from God’s word is automatically

excommunicated. Nevertheless, one has the right of freedom where Scripture is not explicit, but individual right is subsumed to the needs of the community. . . . Karlstadt could expand what Scripture states. His case for the care of widows includes care of widowers.¹⁴

Biblical Principles to Decide Theological Issues

A fourth approach would suggest that in the absence of clear biblical texts dealing directly with the topic under investigation we should look for biblical principles that may shed light on the respective issue, evaluate them prayerfully, and determine how these principles are to be applied to theological and ethical issues. Biblical principles are found in biblical texts. In order not to misuse these texts they should be exegeted first, followed by a theological analysis that looks for the texts' topic and theological themes. From these theological themes biblical principles can be derived. This approach would insist that biblical commandments and prohibitions must be taken seriously. The same is true for biblical principles. The will of God can never safely be ignored.¹⁵

Let us return to the health issue. This approach would look at what Scripture has to say about health and would, for instance, find that God has entrusted our bodies to us and expects us to be good stewards of them. It would listen to Scripture calling our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and challenging us to glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor 6:20). In light of this biblical principles, the tremendous health risks associated with smoking make it difficult-for a Christian to justify this practice.

The Bible does not contain a clear prohibition of slavery; yet, by looking at biblical principles that stress human dignity, freedom, and basic equality as well as by studying Paul's treatment of slavery in letters such as Philemon many Christians, including Adventists, came to realize that slavery had to be abolished.

Evaluating the Approaches

The four approaches are basic approaches to deal with theological and ethical issues that are not directly addressed in Scripture. There may be more than the four—and there are more, if one opts for critical approaches to Scripture—but we will concentrate on these and will briefly evaluate them, pointing to their strengths and weaknesses.

First Approach: What Scripture Does Not Prohibit Is Allowed

This approach allows for quite a bit of freedom and responsibility. However, it can also be dangerous and freedom can be abused. It seems to be too simplistic and may not take into consideration biblical principles that may exist while direct biblical texts are lacking. The Bible has more to say about lifestyle issues, ethics, and other questions than what appears on its surface level. Therefore, this approach seems to be problematic.

Second Approach: What Scripture Does Not Allow Is Prohibited

The second approach seems to have clear controls and may not as easily be abused as the first approach, but it can be very restrictive and make life today very difficult. The question would also be, if such an approach is really the intention of Scripture and favored by Scripture itself. Undoubtedly, the second approach lacks the freedom that the first approach guarantees. It may hardly look for biblical principles and may also be satisfied with a superficial reading of Scripture. In addition, following such an approach would complicate or even hinder the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the proclamation of the Three Angels' Messages, if, e.g., modern means of transportation and communication were excluded.

Scripture tells us not to add to or subtract from it (Deut 4:1-2; Rev 22:18-19; etc.). And one could argue that this means we are not allowed to do anything that is not mentioned in Scripture. However, the question is whether or not these texts have to be interpreted this way. G. R. Osborne correctly argues that they should be understood in the context of heresy. "As in Deuteronomy, Christ is warning against false teachers who distort the meaning of the prophecies by adding their own teaching to it or removing the meaning that God intended."¹⁶ This is supported by G. K. Beale: "Such false teaching amounts to 'adding to' God's law. It is also tantamount to 'taking away from' God's law . . ."¹⁷ These biblical texts do not address the issue "What Scripture does not explicitly allow is forbidden," e.g., driving a car is prohibited because it is not specifically allowed in Scripture. Ironically, while teaching additional regulations—things not explicitly mentioned in Scripture but enforced in order not to go beyond what Scripture allows for—recording them in Mishnah, Talmud, and other documents, and most likely not regarding them as additions to Scripture,

Jewish leaders actually added their traditions to Scripture and were criticized by Jesus for this practice. As the first approach, so also this second approach is quite problematic.

Third Approach: Choosing the Two Aforementioned Approaches Simultaneously

To pick and choose between the two approaches above sounds bizarre. It is hardly conceivable that the first and second approaches can be combined in a meaningful way and be compatible. It defies all logic to alternate between these approaches that are diametrically opposed to each other.

Unfortunately, people are inconsistent and oftentimes make decisions that are not based on clear principles. Because of sloppy thinking they may combine what is irreconcilable. They may also divide life into different compartments with some being governed by one approach while others are governed by the opposite approach. It seems to us that the third approach is worse than the previous two. Knowingly or unknowingly the individual becomes the norm to interpret Scripture. With this approach there is the danger that the first or second position are chosen subjectively, either to come to personally desired outcomes and conclusions or to maintain some kind of tradition.

Fourth Approach: Biblical Principles to Decide Theological Issues

As pointed out, the fourth approach to issues not mentioned in Scripture is governed by biblical principles. It may be more challenging than the previous approaches and forces those applying it to study Scripture seriously, pray, and seek the will of God. However, this is not disadvantageous but actually beneficial. It fosters a mature and growing relationship with God. This approach seems also to allow for some latitude, especially when dealing with the concept of Christian stewardship. By default, this seems to be the best possible approach among the four.

W. C. Kaiser and M. Silva maintain: “Only what is directly taught in Scripture is binding on the conscience. . . . To bind the consciences of believers to that which is not *directly* taught in Scripture is to come perilously close to raising up a new form of tradition . . .”¹⁸ This sounds like the first approach. But they continue: “Thus, what is directly condemned in Scripture, we must condemn. And what is condemned by immediate application of a principle we must also condemn.”¹⁹

Selecting an Approach

This brings us to the point where we have to make a decision on the various approaches dealing with issues not directly mentioned in Scripture. Such a decision is at the same time a decision on how to do theology. Obviously, a simplistic approach will not do. The Lord wants us to grapple with issues, think them through, and—under the guidance of His Spirit—come up with responses to questions not directly addressed in Scripture that are biblically-based, sound, and consistent.

What does the Bible suggest? How did Jesus and the apostles go about dealing with questions that were not discussed (or not sufficiently discussed) in Scripture?

In Matthew 19 Jesus was confronted with the question of divorce. The Old Testament contained a permission of divorce in the case of indecency (Deut 24:1-3). But Jesus knew that this was a concession made to Israel due to the people’s hardness of heart (Matt 19:8). So he did not choose the approach “what the Bible does not explicitly prohibit is allowed.” Rather he went to the biblical principle that he found in the creation account, declaring that God made one man and one woman, joined the two together in marriage, and they became one flesh (Gen 1:27; 2:24). From this fact Jesus deduced: “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt 19:6).

In Romans 1 Paul discussed the sinfulness of the Gentiles, mentioning various vices including homosexual activity. Clear prohibitions of a homosexual lifestyle are found in Leviticus 18 and 20. But Paul did not only allude to these texts but provided the creation (Rom 1)/fall (Rom 5) context as a reason for the rejection of homosexuality activity. Even though Paul had biblical texts opposed to a homosexual lifestyle, he still used biblical principles to point out the problem.

When His disciples were accused of breaking the Sabbath because they were picking some heads of grain—supposedly harvesting, threshing, and winnowing—Jesus opposed the absurdity of the claim by referring to 1 Samuel 21, the story of David receiving the consecrated bread, and concluded: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Evidently, the fourth approach should be favored. Again this is an approach dealing with issues not mentioned at all, or only marginally mentioned in Scripture. It does not do away with a literal understanding of biblical texts, (unless we encounter parables, metaphors, symbols, etc.),²⁰ but involves sound exegesis derived

from Scripture itself and the discovery of biblical themes. But some questions remain: First, how do we find biblical principles and apply them to the issues we face? Answer: We read Scripture widely and on a regular basis. We ask the Holy Spirit to guide us to the right principles. Also the community of believers is important because generally the church as a whole is able to point us to biblical principles that are applicable to specific situations.

Second, which additional criteria should be utilized?

- (a) When looking for biblical principles, those principles have priority that share the same or similar concerns with the question under investigation. For instance, when abortion is being discussed, principles related to the value of life, killing, and death need to be considered.
- (b) The solution to a specific case must be in harmony with other biblical teachings on the same subject as well as with the entire biblical message.²¹ While we acknowledge different theological emphases in various biblical books, nevertheless there is an overarching unity. Consequently, there should not be loose ends and conflicting statements when we do theology to determine how difficult questions not directly addressed in Scripture should be solved. Biblical truth is an integrated and united system which should not be destroyed.
- (c) Some issues/principles should be traced throughout the Bible in order to see whether or not changes in practice have taken place. If changes can be observed, the direction of change may be further pursued, as was done, for example, by Christians in the case of the abolition of slavery.
- (d) Christians are not islands. Dealing with these questions may require us to consult with other church members and people of experience and to listen their suggestions and advice.

Conclusion

People with a high view of Scripture have several options when it comes to responding to questions that are not addressed or only marginally addressed in Scripture. An approach that uses biblical principles to deal with these issues seems to be most fruitful and demanded by Scripture itself. Adventists are keen to maintain their faithfulness to Scripture.

¹Cf. Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series vol. 12, edited by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 58-104; Gerhard Pfandl, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (Wahroonga, Australia: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, n.d.; Ekkehardt Mueller, "Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, edited by G. W. Reid, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 111-134.

²Jack Pearl Lewis, "Silence of Scripture in Reformation Thought," *Restoration Quarterly* 48/2 (2006): 73.

³Lewis, 82.

⁴Cf. Lewis, 83-84. Darrell Hamilton, "Silence of the Scriptures,"

<http://lavistachurchofchrist.org/LVarticles/SilenceOfTheScriptures.htm>, accessed 5/15/2012, seems cautiously to allow for this approach, but does not seem to be completely clear, because he may to some extent sympathize with the second approach.

⁵I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 40. "The Anglicans . . . 'upheld the authority of Scripture inasmuch as no practice directly condemned by the Bible should be countenanced in public worship . . .'"

⁶John Barber, "Luther and Calvin on Music and Worship," *Reformed Perspective Magazine*, 8/26 (2006), 8, n. 23.

⁷Lewis, 75. However, Zwingli was not consistent: "Zwingli's concept of a state church demanded infant membership, and he defended infant baptism though he had earlier agreed that it had no scriptural command or example. . . . When the Anabaptists demanded a text for infant baptism, Zwingli replied that neither was there a plain text for admission of women to the Lord's Table, but he thought no wrong was being done in the practice" (75).

⁸John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.18.12.

⁹Quoted in W.E. Garrison and A.T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1958), 140. Similar ideas are expressed by popular writers such as Stan Cox, "The Silence of Scripture,"

<http://www.watchmanmag.com/0612/061210.htm>; accessed 5/15/2012, who is opposed to musical instruments in the worship service, missionary societies, fellowship halls, socials, women preachers, and many other things, Mark Dunagan, "Silence of the Scriptures," http://www.ch-of-christ.beaverton.or.us/Silence_of_the_Scriptures.htm; accessed 5/15/2012, and Wayne Jackson, "The 'Silence' of the Scriptures: Permissive or Prohibitive?" <http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/128-the-silence-of-the-scriptures-permissive-or-prohibitive>, accessed 5/15/2012.

¹⁰Woody Woodrow, "The Silence of Scripture and the Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 28/1 (1985-1986): 31-32.

¹¹Woodrow, 38.

¹²Marshall, 40.

¹³ Woodrow, 33, shows that the same pattern appeared with other Restorationists, e.g., G. C. Brewer (1884-1956). He “also maintained the force of silence to be proscriptive and permissive. On the one hand, silence meant prohibition to act: ‘To remain silent means that we will stop practicing where the Bible stops teaching; that our practice in matters of religion is limited by the word of the Lord, restricted by divine revelation.’ However, Brewer also believed many current organizations about which Scripture said nothing were allowable: ‘We may have a Bible school (Sunday school), a singing school, a Christian college, a religious paper, an orphans’ home, an old people’s home, etc.’” See Lewis, 78, on John Oecolampadius.

¹⁴ Lewis, 79. In a similar way Calvin “approved ‘of those human constitutions only which are founded on the authority of God and derived from Scripture, and are therefore altogether divine.’ But Calvin made a distinction between ‘all the parts of divine worship, and everything necessary to salvation’ and ‘external discipline and ceremonies’” (85).

¹⁵ Some people have used the story of Noah and God’s command to build the ark with gopher wood and have concluded that Noah was not allowed to use other wood for the ark. I would agree. But Noah was not told not to make tools and was not told to make them from gopher wood. If he made tools from pinewood, this was not a violation of the divine will, many people would most likely say.

¹⁶ G. R. Osborne. *Revelation*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 795.

¹⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1151. See also D. L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 56A (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 80.

¹⁸ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 204. Marshall, 9, believes “it is right to seek a principled way of moving from Scripture to its contemporary understanding and application, and that the way to do this is to explore how the principles can be established from Scripture itself . . .” However, he seems to go way beyond what is suggested here.

¹⁹ Walter and Silva, 205.

²⁰ Non-literal or figurative language requires additional procedures for a careful and accurate interpretation.

²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in Marshall, 93, writes: “They must learn to read particular texts in the context of the whole Scripture, and in relation to the center of Scripture, the gospel of Jesus Christ. They must learn not simply to parse the verbs or to process the information, but to render the same kind of judgments as those embedded in the canon in new contexts and with different concepts. ‘Canon is key . . .’”

10/12