

## Is There Room for Systematics in Adventist Theology?

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When I arrived at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in 1979, I purposed to study systematics under the guidance of Adventist systematicians. Shortly thereafter I took a course in Eschatology with Dr. Hans K. LaRondelle. To my satisfaction I discovered that Dr. LaRondelle was developing, in that class, the kind of systematic theology I had expected.

Some months later I visited with Dr. LaRondelle in his office. On that occasion he assured me, to my surprise and confusion, that he considered himself a biblical rather than a systematic theologian. Later I discovered that when Adventists considered opening a seminary, one clear concern was to stay with biblical theology, because “a shift from biblical to systematic theology would have a liberalizing influence on Adventist religion teachers.”<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion these examples are not isolated incidents; rather, they describe what I perceive as a deep-rooted mind-set within the Adventist Church not only in North America, but also around the world.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it might

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<sup>1</sup>Keld J. Reynolds, “The Church under Stress 1931-1960,” in *Adventism in America: A History*, ed. Gary Land (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 199. This concern seems to have influenced the way theology was taught in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. At least according to Richard W. Schwarz’s view, in those early days of Seminary history, “an emphasis on biblical theology rather than the systematic theology of the general Protestant seminaries . . . gave a distinctive stamp to Adventist seminary education” (*Light Bearers to the Remnant: Denominational History Textbook for Seventh-day Adventist College Classes* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1979], 489).

<sup>2</sup>I am not aware of the existence of any statistical study on this issue that would confirm or disprove my suspicion. However, it is not difficult to think of examples of this tendency. For instance, according to Mario Veloso’s view, “the Adventist Church places more emphasis in biblical than systematic theology” (*El Hombre, una Persona Viviente*, [Brasilia: SALT, 1980], 9). Veloso, however, suggests that since Adventism has not developed a systematic theology, its study should be included within the area of historical theology (9-10).

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be worthwhile to consider whether systematics should have a place in Adventist theology. In this essay my purpose is to advance a preliminary answer in order to steer scholarly discussion on this disciplinary issue.

First, I will address the general perspective from which we will approach the issue. Next, we will discuss the relevancy of the question for Adventism. After taking a general look into the nature of the issue—systematic theology as discipline—we will examine the reluctance of Adventism to engage in systematic theology, the tendency to the status quo, and the extrapolation from everyday life convictions into the realm of systematics as factors limiting the development of the discipline in Adventist schools. Subsequently, we will distinguish exegetical and biblical theologies from the viewpoint systematic theology, both methodologically and teleologically. Finally, we will explore the need for systematic theology in Adventism and the basis on which systematic theology could become actively involved in Adventist theology.

#### **Personal Perspective**

My point of view has been shaped by thirty-five years of contact with Adventist scholarship. My sense is that while Adventist scholarship has developed strongly in such areas as chronology, archaeology, history of antiquity, history of the church and its theology (mainly in the areas of Protestantism and Adventism), exegesis, and biblical theology,<sup>3</sup> I do not see among Adventists the same

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<sup>3</sup>Grant R. Osborne describes biblical theology as a scholarly discipline in the following terms: “Biblical theology constitutes the first step away from the exegesis of individual passages and toward the delineation of their significance for the church today. At this level we collect and arrange the themes that unite the passages and can be traced through a book or author as a whole. This is done in three steps: first, we study the theological themes in terms of individual books, then we explore the theology of an author, and finally we trace the progress of revelation that unites a testament and even the Bible as a whole. . . . In this way biblical theology collates the results of exegesis and provides the data for the systematic theologian to contextualize in developing theological dogma for the church today” (*The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991], 263). Gerhard Hasel points out that “biblical theology must be understood to be a historical-theological discipline. This is to say that the biblical theologian engaged in doing either Old or New Testament theology must claim as his task both to discover and describe what the text meant and also to explicate what it means for today” (*Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 129). It follows that the task of systematic theology cannot be defined as ascertaining the meaning of Scripture for today. How the exegetical task of determining what the text means today differs from the systematic task of “contextualization of biblical theology” is not explained by Osborne (*ibid.*, 309-310). What is apparent is that according to this disciplinary scenario the task proper to systematics is communication rather than discovery of biblical truth. Human philosophies, then, are considered to be only the external vehicle of communication by way of contextualizing. In my opinion, to consider that philosophy plays only a neutral function in communication is to have a distorted view of what actually occurs in the task of both biblical and systematic theologies as scholarly disciplines.

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concern for solid scholarly development in systematic theology.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, it seems to me that a sizeable number of Adventist scholars are at ease in arriving at doctrinal conclusions working from within the limitations proper to the methods of their disciplines (not only from exegetical and biblical theologies but also from practical theology). Conversely, it also seems to me that most systematians, at least the few I know personally, will hardly dare to arrive at scholarly conclusions in chronology, archaeology, history, exegesis, and biblical theology by utilizing the scholarly methods of systematic theology.

If this perception is true, it is not difficult to comprehend why scholars holding these methodological convictions find it neither relevant nor necessary to open a disciplinary room for systematics. In other words, if we can arrive at the doctrinal statements and teachings of Christianity by using the scholarly methods proper to exegetical and biblical theologies, why should we bother developing an additional scholarly discipline whose aim, the formulation of doctrines, is already achieved by these other disciplines?

### Is the Question Relevant?

The role of systematics in theology is not a relevant issue for most Adventists today. The reason is not difficult to ascertain. On one hand, few lay persons have any idea what systematics is all about. On the other hand, most theologians know very well what systematics is in the context of Christian theology. They know that because systematics follows philosophical categories, it is incompatible with the *sola Scriptura* principle and with the content and spirit of the Adventist faith. It is not surprising, then, that most Adventist theologians have not seen systematics in a positive light. Furthermore, it is possible to perceive why

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<sup>4</sup>Even though several names could be mentioned as representatives of a growing task force of Adventist theologians working within the academic discipline of systematics, publications in terms of specialized books are not numerous. By way of example, Edward Heppenstall and Richard Rice could be mentioned. Edward Heppenstall has written on several topics, for instance, *The Man Who is God: A Study of the Person and Nature of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1977); *Our High Priest: Jesus Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1972); and *Salvation Unlimited: Perspectives in Righteousness by Faith* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1974). Among Richard Rice's publications three are more directly related to the subject and issue of systematics. They are: *God's Foreknowledge & Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology From a Seventh-Day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1985; 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 1997); and *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra UP, 1991). The latter work includes the most specific treatment of theology from a methodological disciplinary perspective written so far by an Adventist author. Unfortunately, Rice finds it difficult to adhere to the *sola Scriptura* principle. Gerhard Hasel has criticized Rice's approach on this account ("Scripture and Theology," *JATS* 4/2 [Autumn 1993]: 68-72). Norman R. Gulley has also contributed to the analysis of methodological issues ("The Influence of Philosophical and Scientific World Views on the Development of Theology," *JATS* 4/2 [1993]: 137-160) and is presently writing a systematic theology.

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the conviction that revealed truth can be attained only through exegetical and biblical theologies has developed in Adventist theological circles.<sup>5</sup>

Is biblical theology able to take care of all theological tasks required for the discovery of biblical truth? If the answer is yes, then the discipline of systematics is not necessary and the question remains forever irrelevant. However, if biblical theology is not able to handle all theological issues, some disciplinary room could open for systematics and the question will find its relevancy.

The few aspects we will examine will not be sufficient to make a solid case in favor of making room for systematics in Adventist theology. They will serve, however, to open the question for scholarly discussion.

#### **The Disciplinary Nature of the Question**

The question, “Is there room for systematics in Adventist theology?” assumes two major factors. The first factor, starting at the beginnings of Christian history, is the existence of a scholarly track for searching out theological truth in Christian theology. The second factor arose with the development of modern theology during the eighteenth century. During the modern period the scholarly pursuit of theological truth became specialized and divided into several independent disciplines, each pursuing a specific goal and working within the limits of a specific methodology.<sup>6</sup> When the study of Scripture is undertaken exclusively within the parameters of the local church, we are not pursuing truth within the scholarly track but the everyday-life track. In the practical track of congregational life, the question regarding the respective roles of systematics and biblical theology does not arise. Our question, however, becomes unavoidable when the community of faith searches for theological truth within the scholarly track.

This is not the place to discuss whether Adventism should pursue the discovery of Christian truth within the scholarly track, or should remain only a lay movement uninvolved in the world of scholarship. The fact remains, however,

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<sup>5</sup>Within Adventism, Gerhard Hasel has given specific technical formulation to the issue of biblical theology as a scholarly discipline. He has dealt with this issue in his *Old Testament Theology* and in *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). Hasel has updated and expanded his views in a recent series of articles (see Gerhard Hasel, “The Nature of Biblical Theology: Recent Trends and Issues,” *AUSS* 32 (1994): 203-215; “Recent Models of Biblical Theology: Three Major Perspectives,” *AUSS* 33 (1995): 55-75; and, “Proposals for a Canonical Biblical Theology,” *AUSS* 34 (1995): 23-33).

<sup>6</sup>The recognition that Christian theology involves several interrelated yet independent scholarly disciplines is a recent development in the history of Christianity. For instance, during the Middle Ages the most prominent interdisciplinary relation was not within theological disciplines but between theology and philosophy. Wolfhart Pannenberg points out that before modern times, “apart from the separation of canon law—the fundamental distinction was that between biblical interpretation and systematic theology. The beginnings of this distinction go back to the Middle Ages, though the development into autonomous disciplines did not reach any completion before the late eighteenth century. All the other theological disciplines have acquired their autonomy in modern times” (*Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], 351).

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that Adventists have been actively involved in the scholarly track of theology, at least since they began to create universities and graduate programs in theology some four decades ago.

The distinction between systematic and biblical theologies is a recent phenomenon in the history of Christian theology. For about seventeen centuries Christian theology was pursued within the confines of systematic (dogmatic) theology.<sup>7</sup> During that period there was no biblical theology as independent discipline, as we have it today in Adventist seminaries. Biblical theology came to challenge the universal reign of systematic theology when it became an independent theological discipline around the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> From the very beginning, biblical theology experienced its identity and task as essentially connected to the criticism of dogmatic theology,<sup>9</sup> thus setting the immediate context from which the question “Is there room for systematics in Adventist theology?” arises.

As ancient Greek philosophy gave birth to a number of independent scientific disciplines, so systematic or dogmatic theology gave birth to a number of theological disciplines, of which biblical theology was the first, followed, among others, by fundamental theology, practical theology, and missiology. This ensemble of new independent theological disciplines is technically designated as the theological encyclopedia. As theological reflection, the theological encyclopedia examines the way in which the various disciplines involved in theological studies interrelate in the unified task of discovering truth. The theo-

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<sup>7</sup>Within the Protestant theological tradition the label systematic theology began to be applied to theology possibly during the seventeenth century following the initiative of Bartholomäus Keckermann. For an introduction to the history of systematic theology see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 404-410; and Frank Hasel, “Algunas Reflexiones sobre la relación entre la teología sistemática y la teología bíblica,” *Theologika* 11, no. 1 (1996): 109-111. However, ever since the times of Origen (c.185-253/54) Christian theology has been conceived and formulated under the disciplinary structure we call today systematic theology. For instance, one of the greatest systematians of all times, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), spoke of “sacred doctrine” instead of the modern label “systematic theology” (*Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. [New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947], Ia 1).

<sup>8</sup>In the historical process that gave rise to biblical theology as an independent discipline, Ebeling sees a decisive turning point taking place with the publication of *Gedanken von der Beschaffenheit und dem Vorzug der biblisch-dogmatischen Theologie vor der alten und neuen scholastischen* [Reflections on the Nature of Biblical Dogmatic Theology and on Its Superiority to Scholasticism Old and New] (1758), by Anton Friedrich Büsching (*Word and Faith*, 87). By this step biblical theology moved from being a subsidiary discipline of dogmatics to becoming “a rival of the prevailing dogmatics [scholastic theology]” (ibid.). Biblical theology “set itself up as a completely independent study, namely, as a critical historical discipline alongside dogmatics” in 1787 with a programmatic lecture by Johann Philipp Gabler (ibid, 88; Thiselton, “Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics,” 520). Gerhard Hasel gives a slightly earlier date for the independence of biblical theology from dogmatics. “As early as 1745 ‘biblical theology’ is clearly separated from dogmatic (systematic) theology and the former is conceived of as being the foundation of the latter” (*Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 18).

<sup>9</sup>Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, 88-91.

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logical encyclopedia also has an educational side when it deals with the organization of the theological curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

Adventist seminaries engaged in the scholarly pursuit of Christian truth are *de facto* assuming the divisions of disciplines emerging from the modern creation of independent disciplines. Failure to address this disciplinary issue may be detrimental to the theological, spiritual, and missionary experience of the people of God. The multiplication of Adventist seminaries and universities around the world, accompanying the numerical growth of the Church, attests to the prominence Adventists give the scholarly track in the pursuit of truth.

Whether there is room for systematic theology within Adventist theology, then, belongs to the broader question of how the various theological disciplines should interrelate as they attempt to formulate the teachings of Christian theology.

#### **Reluctance to Engage in Systematic Theology as Scholarly Discipline**

In my opinion, an important cause for Adventist distrust in systematics is the generally held conviction that systematic theology can only distort the true results of biblical exegesis. This conviction springs from Adventism's high view of Scripture and the philosophical methodology of systematic theology. On one hand, the ground of Adventist theology consists in faithfulness to Scripture as expressed in the *sola, tota, and prima Scriptura* principles.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the essence of systematics resides in the application of a "system" to the theological data. Without a "system" the existence of "systematics" is impossible.<sup>12</sup>

So far, in Christian theology the "system" upon which a systematic theologian develops his or her work has been taken, explicitly or implicitly, from some

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<sup>10</sup>Pannenberg explains that "a conception of theology in general ought to be able to show to what extent its internal organization into the disciplines of exegesis, church history, dogmatics and practical theology can be defended as necessary or at least rational, or to what extent the existing divisions of theology should be critically re-examined in the light of the concept of theology, particularly as regards their mutual relations and their understanding of method. This . . . aspect of the self-appraisal of theology within the framework of philosophy of science is the subject matter of the theological encyclopedia" (*Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 5-6). See also Gerhard Ebeling, (*The Study of Theology*, trans. Duane A. Priebe [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 8).

<sup>11</sup>Gerhard Hasel, "Scripture and Theology," 86.

<sup>12</sup>Catholic theologian Avery Dulles underlines this broadly accepted disciplinary fact. "It is impossible to carry through the project of systematic theology without explicit commitment to particular philosophical options" (*The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 119). Hasel also agrees with this fact as he recognizes that the systematic theologian or dogmatician "has and always will have to fulfil his own task in that he endeavours to use current philosophies as the basis for his primary categories or themes. For the systematic theologian it is indeed appropriate to operate with philosophical categories, because his foundations are on a base different from that of the biblical theologian" (*Old Testament Theology*, 130). In my opinion, in this statement Hasel is not describing the way in which systematics should be conducted in Adventism but rather the actual way in which Catholicism and Protestantism have developed their approaches to systematics in the scholarly arena.

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sort of human philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Because of these disciplinary and historical facts, Adventists have been, and continue to be, in practice, suspicious of systematics.<sup>14</sup> I believe that a hermeneutic of suspicion toward systematics, on account of the philosophical nature of its “system,” is appropriate. Most Adventist theologians will not consciously or explicitly work on the basis of a philosophical system. This hermeneutic of suspicion should be permanently applied not only within the field of systematic theology but also within the fields of biblical and practical theologies. We must follow the biblical dictum to “Prove all things,” not least when we are studying the work of theologians.

I find, however, some Adventist writers who, in spite of their explicit claim to build on Scripture alone, are nevertheless being implicitly influenced by extra-biblical philosophical notions. How can this be? A likely cause of this unfortunate situation could be that frequently Adventists have the tendency to forget that Christian theology, in both its classical and liberal forms, has been built on the ground of human philosophies. Thus, many ideas striking one as biblical can, on reflection, be traced back to a human philosophical origin.

Many Adventists work under the illusion that philosophical ideas do not influence biblical or practical theologies. Unfortunately, we also run into philosophical teachings in the very foundation and methodology of biblical and practical theologies. When interacting with the extraordinary wealth of available theological ideas, theologians working in these areas will benefit from applying a hermeneutic of suspicion sensitive to the frequently hidden philosophical systems operative within them.

Should we conclude from these facts that the reluctance to accept systematic theology as a contributor to the discovery and formulation of biblical truths is justified? In my opinion, I think that it is. But does the philosophical nature of a system required by systematics mean that there is no room for an Adventist systematics faithful to the *sola Scriptura* principle? I do not think so. However,

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<sup>13</sup>Dulles recognizes that “hitherto Catholic theology has relied principally on the axioms and categories of Greek philosophy, filtered, in some cases, through Roman or Arabic thinkers. After early experiments with Stoicism, the fathers came to prefer some variety of Platonism. Although Aristotle had long been an influence, his philosophy did not become dominant until the High Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of Catholic theologians, constructed his system on the basis of a Platonized form of Aristotelianism” (ibid.). This is the case also for Protestant theology (See John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, by Clark Pinnock, et al. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994], 59-100); Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 21-23); and Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], 85-86).

<sup>14</sup>Veloso, in my opinion, has correctly identified that Adventism’s main objection to systematic theology as a proper theological discipline is centered on the fact that systematics always draws its “system” from human philosophical ideas (6-7). Such a procedure violates the *sola Scriptura* principle. Consequently, “Adventist theologians have developed their theological reflection by the side [al margen] of philosophical systems, and following an approach that rather separates them from such systems” (7).

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from these considerations, it seems reasonable to conclude that if Adventist scholars should decide to make room for systematics, the issue of a system *vis-a-vis* the *sola Scriptura* principle becomes unavoidable. Bypassing this foundational issue cannot but place Adventist theology under the influence of some sort of human philosophy. Moreover, to not make room for systematics entails that biblical and practical theologies will forever remain open to the stealthy influence of various philosophical systems.

#### **Inertia and Extrapolations from the Everyday-life Track**

Contentment with the present way in which theological business is approached in the scholarly arena may be the most formidable obstacle to making room for systematics. In other words, if we are doing fine, why should we change? The sheer inertia of the status quo conspires against systematics in Adventist theology. Most Adventist scholars and pastors have been forced to be specialists and generalists simultaneously. Before the creation of Adventist universities, most Adventist scholars were generalists. Ever since the denomination founded its first two universities in the early sixties, more and more Adventist scholars have been trained as specialists in a specific scholarly discipline (Ph.D.s). Most scholars work within their own specialties but live and teach in a world not neatly divided into scholarly disciplines. Moreover, the absence of an interdisciplinary methodology in Adventist scholarly theology has forced most scholars to deal with all kinds of theological questions in areas in which they have not been trained. Thus, Adventist scholars continually cross over disciplinary lines and answer questions in areas in which they are not qualified. After years of intense wrestling with theological questions, most Adventist theologians have developed their own views on the entire realm of theology which they do not want criticized by an independent discipline.

In other words, the search for truth in the everyday-life track forces us to deal with a variety of issues that within the scholarly track belong to different areas of specialty. It is as if a cardiologist decided to remove a patient's tonsils—a general knowledge of the anatomy may allow a successful surgery, but with much greater risk to the patient. Within the everyday-life track all of us are exegetes, systematians, and pastors. Because the scholarly training of most theologians limits their proficiency to one area, the temptation to extrapolate from the everyday-life track into the scholarly track becomes real. This extrapolation might have been justified and even required when Adventism, forty years ago, moved into the scholarly track. However, in its scholarly development Adventism has arrived at a point in which extrapolations from the everyday-track directly into scholarly conclusions should be carefully avoided. This extrapolation may be a factor beclouding the perception of the need for systematics in Adventism. After all, each theologian has his or her own scholarly views regarding Christian doctrines, the specific subject matter of systematic theology.



### **Methodological and Teleological Differentiation**

Another factor contributing to this situation may be the lack of a common understanding of what we mean by biblical and systematic theologies. I am sure that many readers may find the point I am trying to make in this article somehow elusive, due mainly to their implicit understanding of the meaning of biblical theologies. In other words, I am convinced that Adventists define biblical theology in various ways. For some Adventists, biblical theology is equal to exegesis; for others, the exposition of biblical teachings supported by the exegetical method; even, for others, systematic theology.<sup>15</sup> This variety of opinions is not the result of explicit scholarly disagreement on the issue, but of implicit forgetfulness. Besides, these specific views progress from a very limited understanding of the whole picture (exegesis) to a very broad view with limited understanding of the minutiae (systematic theology). Moreover, each view uses different methodologies. Since each one of these uses may be justified, we need to formulate a working definition of biblical theology, leaving the scholarly discussion on its nature and methodology for a later time.

For the limited purpose of this article I will differentiate between biblical and systematic theologies from the methodological and teleological viewpoints. Two scholarly enterprises are different when they have different goals (subject-matter or object of investigation) and methodologies to achieve them. If the interpretation of Scripture and the task of scholarly discovery of Christian truth (goal) require only the application of the exegetical method, it follows that there is no room for systematics.

The question we are asking, “Is there room for systematics in Adventist theology?” is, after all, a methodological question. In order to answer the proposed question, then, we need to briefly consider the basic features that characterize the exegetical and systematic methodologies.

### **Distinguishing between Exegetical and Systematic Methodologies**

Probably the most serious argument against the need to make room for systematics in Adventist theology is the scholarly conviction that biblical theology and its methodology are sufficient to conceive and formulate the entire range of Adventist theology. According to this view, systematics is taught in our semi-

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<sup>15</sup>Gerhard Hasel recognizes that “the name ‘biblical theology’ is equivocal. It can refer to a theology that is biblical in the sense that it is rooted in the Bible, is in harmony with the Bible, or is drawn from the Bible. It can also refer to a theology that is biblical in the sense that it presents the theology which the Bible contains or simply a theology of the Bible. The former conception takes biblical theology as part of the realm of theological studies, whereas the latter conception sees biblical theology as part of biblical studies. We suggest that a biblical theology is the theology of the Bible as Scripture. Accordingly, its content is determined by the canonical form of Scripture and not by philosophical or theological models of Judeo-Christian or other thought, of whatever culture or setting.” (*Proposals for a Canonical Biblical Theology*, 28) As we can see, in this statement Hasel did make room for a theology other than biblical theology.

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naries not in order to discover and reach biblical truth, but for the same general reasons that we teach other disciplines—for instance, history of theology—that is, to make pastors aware of the world of ideas they will find in their ministries. This conviction does not leave room for systematics in Adventist theology. To ascertain the merits of this position, we need to distinguish between exegetical, biblical, and systematic theologies.

#### **Exegetical and Biblical theologies.**

My purpose in this section is not a detailed comparison between biblical and systematic theologies, but a brief examination of the belief that biblical theology as an independent scholarly discipline is able to produce the doctrines or teachings of Christianity. This examination will be conducted from a methodological viewpoint. In the task of formulating the beliefs and doctrines of the Church, is the exegetical methodology of biblical theology sufficient, or should a systematic methodology be called to complement it? I will answer this question by differentiating between biblical and systematic methodologies. This differentiation provides the disciplinary context from which the question of the role of systematics in Adventist theology may arise.

I will characterize the methodology of each scholarly discipline by reference to two of their distinctive features, namely, the object of study or subject matter, and one distinctive procedure of each discipline. I will state the two identifying features for each scholarly discipline first, and then I will explain the way in which they help us perceive the inner soul of each discipline. We may briefly say that, on the one hand, the subject matter exegetical and biblical theologies attempt to clarify is the text of Scripture, and the salient procedure they utilize in searching for the meaning of their object is “analysis.” On the other hand, the subject matter of systematics is reality or life, while the salient procedure it utilizes in searching for the meaning of its object is “synthesis.”

Let us begin by considering the basic feature of exegetical and biblical theologies with which Adventist theologians are most familiar. The ultimate goal of these disciplines is to bring forth the meanings of the biblical text in their specificity and as a whole. There is a difference between exegetical and biblical theologies. Exegetical theology searches for the meaning of biblical texts, while biblical theology searches for the theology of Scripture by book, groups of books, and Scripture as a whole.<sup>16</sup> The way exegetical and biblical theologies

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<sup>16</sup>Jon Paulien describes the goal of exegetical theology in the following words: “In practical terms, biblical exegesis (NT and OT) seeks to answer the question, ‘What was the biblical writer trying to say?’ What was Paul trying to say when he wrote a letter to the Roman church back in the first century. What issues was he trying to address? What language and arguments did he chose [sic] to use? As a basic process, exegesis is appropriate to any written work, even student papers. It is the process of seeking to understand a writer’s conscious intention for a particular work” (“Three Ways to Approach the Bible: Disciplinary Distinctions” [Berrien Springs, MI: Unpublished paper, 1997], 3-4). Gerhard Hasel describes the goal of biblical theology in two steps. “The first step consists of a

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proceed in attempting to clarify their object of study—the meanings of the text of Scripture—is primarily analytical. The analytical way considers the part before the whole. The analysis of the biblical text requires great skill, scholarship, and experience. The Bible is a whole which the exegete divides until all parts lay bare before his or her eyes. After the scriptural whole is divided into its components (book, chapter, text, sentence, and words) and each part is studied in great detail, exegetes and biblical scholars have to put the parts back together again, which requires synthesis. Biblical theologians believe that through this process of analysis and synthesis the true meaning of Scripture may be discovered.

When the parts are put back together, exegetes and biblical theologians are not using the analytical but the synthetical procedure. Before applying the analytical procedure, exegetical and biblical theologians have no presupposed idea of the whole. Their conception of the whole is built up by bringing the pieces back together again. The movement of synthesis remains faithful to exegetical methodology whether the whole that is brought forth is a sentence, paragraph, chapter, or book. From this brief description it becomes apparent that exegesis and biblical theology make a strong contribution in the understanding of the biblical texts. Their strength lies on the side of the parts rather than on the side of the whole.

As biblical theology attempts to bring forth the whole range of Old and New Testament teachings, the synthetical methodology required crosses over to the realm of ideas within which systematics works.<sup>17</sup> The question then arises whether such a synthesis can be accomplished within the constraints of exegetical methodology. I am not questioning the right biblical theologians have to report on the whole Scripture, yet I wonder about the methodology they use to achieve such a goal. It is my contention that to fully achieve the integration of all biblical teachings, notions, and ideas, the synthetic methodology of systematic theology is necessary. I am not suggesting that bringing together the testi-

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presentation of the theologies of the various OT and NT books or groups of writings so that each biblical witness stands next to the others in all its richness and variety. This procedure allows ample opportunity for every aspect of biblical thought to emerge and be heard. In principle these book-by-book and group-by-group theologies provide the opportunity of recognizing both differences and similarities, continuity, growth, and enlargements, revealing the full richness of the divine self-disclosure. The second step is equally important. It consists of a multitrack treatment of the longitudinal themes, motifs, and concepts that have emerged from the book-by-book and group-by-group presentations. On the basis of the longitudinal thematic perspectives, the totality of the unity of the Bible can be perceived without forcing a single unilinear approach upon the Bible itself" ("Proposal for a Canonical Biblical Theology," 33).

<sup>17</sup>Most biblical theologians work within the limits of either Old or New Testaments. Some attempt to bring the two together into a single theological movement. Some attempts claiming to be an account of biblical theology or Old and New Testament theologies clearly move within a systematic methodology. See, for instance, Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946); and Heinrich Ewald, *Old and New Testament Theology*, trans. Thomas Goadby (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888).

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mony of the whole Bible is a task only systematians can accomplish. What I am claiming is that when biblical theologians attempt to bring the whole Bible together they necessarily switch to a systematic methodology. The characteristics and methodology of biblical theology are necessarily self-limiting, which thus makes necessary the development of systematic theology.

#### **Systematic Theology.**

In this subsection I will speak of the way a systematics that is faithful to scripture should work and not to the traditional way in which systematics operates. The characterization of the subject matter and synthetical procedure of systematics in this section assumes the existence of a biblical philosophical basis of which I will speak in the last section of this article.

Since the methodology of systematic theology is less known in Adventist circles, I will start by clarifying what systematic methodology is not. The methodology of systematic theology should not be equated primarily with an orderly and didactic presentation of teachings.<sup>18</sup> As exegetical and biblical theologians are motivated to discover the meaning of the parts of which Scripture is made up, systematic theologians are motivated to discover the meaning of Christian doctrines as a whole. Moreover, we should note that in biblical theology the “whole” is different from the “whole” in systematics, mainly by reason of its referent.

In biblical theology the “whole” refers to the text of Scripture, while in systematics the “whole” refers to the manifold reality about which Scripture speaks, namely life. Thus, the characteristics, limitations, and articulation of exegetical and biblical theologies are subject to the textual nature of their objects, while the characteristics, limitations, and articulation of systematic theology are subject to the structure and interpretation of the reality the biblical texts speak about. To put it briefly, exegetical and biblical methodologies are textually oriented, while systematic methodologies are ideas and issues oriented to life.

The basic procedure in systematic methodology is synthesis. However, systematics also starts with analysis. The analysis in systematics is directed not

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<sup>18</sup>We should not confuse an orderly and thematic presentation with the *ordo disciplinae* (order of the discipline). The *ordo disciplinae* refers to the inner logic that ties together the broad sections of systematic theology. Of course systematics involves an orderly presentation of doctrines. Thus, Gerhard Hasel is correct in saying that “‘theology’ in the sense of systematic/dogmatic theology means . . . the construction of a theological system of beliefs regarding God and man, sin and salvation, the view of the world from the perspective of the divine, the present church and the future kingdom to come. This definition of ‘theology’ implies the explication of the Christian message in a systematized, coherent, constructive, and orderly way” (“*Scripture and Theology*,” 55). However, “the explication of the Christian message in a systematized, coherent, constructive, and orderly way” is a task that can be achieved by biblical theology. If the proper task of systematics can be performed by biblical theology, it is difficult to see why Adventist academic theology should concern itself with systematics.

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to the text, but to the ideas of the text about reality. Thus, the analytics of concepts and notions is applied following not the linguistic structure of written texts but the dynamic structure of real life. Systematics, thus, attempts to interpret the whole of reality (nature, history, God's salvific activities, and the like) by discovering the inner logic and contents of biblical thought. As a result, systematics conceives and formulates Christian teachings that, in turn, provide the framework and content of Christian ministry and mission.<sup>19</sup>

While the ideological dynamics of systematics links it, structurally and methodologically, to philosophy, the textual dynamics of exegetical and biblical theologies links them to linguistics and to textual and literary criticism. After the notions, events, and teachings of Scripture are analyzed from the perspective of their referents in life,<sup>20</sup> systematics proceeds to bring them together or, in other words, "synthesize" or "articulate" the entire counsel of Scripture. In this way the entire richness of biblical teachings and thought can be brought forth to illuminate the whole of human and divine life. Synthesis is the process through which the various parts are connected to form a whole. The methodology of systematics, then, proceeds not only by analyzing the parts (individual notions, ideas, or teachings) but also by connecting or articulating the parts. Since we have seen that in exegesis and biblical theology there is also a process of synthesis after analysis is completed the question arises as to whether there is any difference between the application of synthesis in biblical and systematic theologies.

By way of example I will deal here with only one basic difference. Biblical theologians use synthesis mainly to put together the parts of a text already analyzed (verse, chapter, book), and at times, the basic teachings of Old and New Testaments. Biblical theology may also attempt to use synthesis to put together the teachings of both testaments in their historical-theological continuity.<sup>21</sup> In so

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<sup>19</sup>Walter C. Kaiser Jr. is an example of a biblical scholar who does not consider systematic theology capable of authentically mediating from the task of biblical theology to the task of preaching. Kaiser does not even consider systematics for the task of preparing the content of biblical preaching. When he asks whether homiletics or biblical theology should be primarily responsible for "preparing a biblical text for preaching," the answer, with which I agree, is biblical theology (*Toward Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 21, 22). The responsibility in preparing the biblical content of preaching falls primarily on systematics. However, I do not blame Kaiser and biblical theologians thinking in that way because the systematic theology they know is not grounded on biblical categories. As underlined in the next section, the systematics I envision, on the contrary, is grounded on the biblical system and its categories.

<sup>20</sup>This gives rise to systematic exegesis, that is, the analysis of the meaning of texts from the viewpoint of their referents in life. This exegesis is still faithful to the text, but is more focused on the broad analytical exploration of all possible meanings of the text that should take place in biblical exegesis. The exploration and relation of these two exegetical approaches will have to wait for a more opportune time.

<sup>21</sup>I am not aware that any such attempt has been made by a biblical scholar, but theoretically it might be conceived. Gerhard Hasel thinks such an enterprise does belong to the realm of biblical

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doing, biblical theology brings out the meanings and teachings that are expressly formulated in Scripture.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the nature and limitations of their synthesis or articulation of the parts of Scripture follow the rules that apply to the interpretation of texts.

Systematic theologians use synthesis constructively to put together the entire range of scriptural ideas as they refer to reality as a whole. In so doing systematic theology brings out meanings and teachings about reality not explicitly expressed in the words of Scripture. Thus, the nature and limitations of the synthesis or articulation of the parts follow rules by which ideas are articulated. To put it simply, by analysis biblical theology brings out biblical ideas from their dormant state in the text, and by synthesis it attempts to present a full descriptive report of the entirety of biblical teachings and to use biblical thought to understand the always changing landscape of life. This report is not just the description of human history, but of teachings and ideas revealed by God.<sup>23</sup> Systematic theologians use the ideas and teachings that biblical theology formulates to interpret real life as a whole.

Systematics also uses analysis, but applies it to the reality it interprets. Once the complexity of the reality to be interpreted is grasped in the specificity of its parts, Adventist systematics may proceed to retrieve from Scripture the ideas

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theology. However, he seems to suggest that a biblical theology of both testaments is still in the future. In an article published posthumously, Hasel explains: "Biblical theology must reflect on OT and NT theology in a dynamic way that overcomes the present juxtaposition. Since the two Testaments produce *one* Bible, it is difficult to look at OT theology in a totally isolated way, as if the NT did not exist" (*Proposals for a Canonical Biblical Theology*, 25). He recognizes a reciprocal relation between testaments, according to which history flows from OT to NT, and life flows from NT to OT. Hasel adds, "when this reciprocal relationship between the Testaments is understood, with the entire Bible as the proper context of the biblical-theological enterprise, we are able to grasp the full potential of biblical theology" (*ibid.*, 23-26).

<sup>22</sup>Two notable attempts at this very difficult task are Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), and more recently, Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). Both attempts historically describe the contents of Scripture as seen through the lenses of exegetical theology. Childs includes methodological issues relevant to the task, a summary of the theological contents of Scripture, more or less following the canonical order, and a theological reflection on the Christian Bible thematically organized following broad biblical motifs that appear in both testaments. These themes are also presented descriptively, summarizing the results of scholarship in the fields of the Old and New Testaments. I think these attempts properly belong to the field of biblical theology and do not replace, but prepare the way for systematic theology.

<sup>23</sup>Reacting against the modernist model of biblical theology, Gerhard Hasel proposes a canonical biblical model for biblical theology. His model correctly claims that biblical theology "is not a purely historical or descriptive enterprise" ("Proposals for a Canonical Biblical Theology," 24) and that the time is ripe "for constructive biblical theology" (*ibid.*, 33). What Hasel envisions is a biblical theology that, bringing forth the understanding of God's cognitive revelation, would make a difference in the development of Christian theology and life. Hasel's model stands in stark contrast to the modernistic model that only describes bits and pieces of "human testimony" and ends up having historical relevancy only for the scholar interested in the study of the history of religions.

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and teachings that apply to the reality to be interpreted. As biblical ideas are brought together not by following their textual, but conceptual or teaching logic, further understanding of the meaning of the text and the truths they express come into view.

Thus, systematics attempts to clarify the totality of real life (history and nature) by using biblical thought and teachings. Moreover, since the whole of reality is always broader than the whole covered by the Bible, systematians are bound to need all the ideas and teachings of Scripture (John 21:25). In other words, systematics does not summarize or “harmonize” the manifoldness of Scripture, but uses every nuance to interpret its broader and more complex subject matter. By retrieving and applying biblical ideas and teachings to the task of interpreting the totality of real life from a biblical perspective, systematians are able to perceive the inner logic of biblical thinking, as it were, from within its inner intellectual operation.

The question arises of how the systematic understanding of the inner logic of Scripture relates to biblical theology’s attempt to bring forth the ultimate unity of all biblical texts. This is not the place to enter into such a detailed and advanced study. I believe that both are possible within the scholarly constraints of each discipline and that they should correct and complement each other. I suspect that the systematic approach to the whole becomes the ground on which the attempt of biblical theology to bring forth the whole intelligibility of scriptural thought becomes possible. I remain unconvinced that Gerhard Hasel’s proposal for a “canonical biblical theology” that would bring “the totality of the unity of the Bible” into view<sup>24</sup> may be possible within the scholarly limitations of the analytically and textually oriented methodology of biblical theology without the help of either systematic or fundamental theologies. My suspicion is based, among other things, on the fact that even Hasel’s proposal requires a center which he describes not in a textual, but in a systematic category, namely, the triune God.<sup>25</sup>

Arguably, the attempt to discover the inner logic of scriptural thought in its entirety necessarily requires a systematic methodology through which a synthesis or articulation not of texts, but of ideas, notions, and teachings may be se-

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>25</sup>Hasel conceives that to bring together the entire range of biblical teachings in their inner scriptural harmony, we need to identify the “center” of theology. Only in reference to the proper center can the inner harmony of Scripture be brought forth without superimposing on Scripture an alien category. He addresses the issue of the center of theology in various writings. Presenting his proposal for a “canonical biblical theology,” Hasel writes: “I would like to reformulate my understanding of the ‘center’ by defining the center of both Testaments as the triune God who revealed Himself in the OT in multiple ways and who has manifested Himself in the NT in the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the God-man” (*ibid.*, 32). To me this looks like the implicit recognition that the task he conceives as part of biblical theology can only be accomplished within the realm of systematic theology. I may yet be persuaded, however, that such an enterprise is possible within the limitations proper to biblical theology.

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cured without trampling on the results of biblical exegesis and theology. Moreover, biblical theology's broadest goal, the articulation of the entire range of scriptural teachings, requires the application of a systematic methodology. On this basis, I think it becomes clear that, in Adventism, biblical theology not only can make room for systematics, but should welcome it as an ally, and vice versa. The uniqueness, complementarity, and mutual correctiveness that takes place between biblical and systematic theologies should be considered as part of the general interdisciplinary matrix of Christian theology.

#### **Perceiving the Need for Systematic Theology in Adventism**

Let us, now, turn to the question of whether Adventist theology needs systematics. The necessity of an Adventist systematic theology will be considered in reference, first, to the nature of some Adventist doctrines, then, to the ongoing process of theological fragmentation, and finally, to the nature of the task of pastors and evangelists.

There is no doubt that the Sanctuary doctrine has played a central role in the origination of Adventism. Generally, Adventists have recognized that the Sanctuary doctrine is unique and foundational to their identity and mission. However, the discovery of the Sanctuary doctrine requires both exegetical and systematic tools. Through the analytical exegesis of biblical literature on the Sanctuary it becomes clear that Scripture teaches about the Sanctuary both in the Old and New Testaments. Biblical exegesis points to the existence of a divine redemptive activity in both the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries. Moreover, Adventist biblical theologians are able to forward a prophetic interpretation of Daniel 8:14 which calls for an investigative judgment beginning in 1844. I am convinced that exegetical and biblical theologies can produce these teachings within the scope of their own methodologies. But these ideas of themselves do not result into the doctrine of the sanctuary.

First of all, we know that from the perspective of exegesis and biblical theologies, other interpretations of the same texts are also possible. The interpretation of biblical texts is not an exact or unambiguous science. Texts can be interpreted in various ways. From the perspective of exegesis, it is at times difficult to decide the meaning of texts. By this I am not saying that exegesis and biblical theology cannot support the traditional Adventist teaching on the Sanctuary. I am suggesting, rather, that our position is an interpretation of the text that conflicts with other interpretations that are, exegetically speaking, equally valid.

To say that an interpretation is exegetically "valid" does not necessarily mean that such an interpretation is true. In the scholarly context an interpretation is "valid" when the interpreter has followed all the required procedures prescribed by the discipline in which the interpretation takes place. Beyond its validity, the truth of an interpretation requires that what it says correspond with reality. But while we wait for, say, the correspondence in life of the biblical teachings on the second coming of Christ, we must attempt to sort out from



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among many exegetically valid interpretations of the text the one that expresses the true meaning of the biblical text. At this point a limitation of biblical exegesis becomes apparent and systematic theology can be of assistance. As systematic theology deals with the referent of the text, one is able to scan the entire surface of Scripture, bringing, searching, and retrieving ideas that connect with the issue or referent even when textual connectivity is not warranted. Whereas the exegetical methodology of biblical theology is prepared to find and justify textual connections, the methodology of systematic theology is prepared to find and justify thought connections. It is at this level that nonbiblical philosophy, explicitly or implicitly, helps exegesis make a statement about the true interpretation of the texts.

For instance, Genesis 1:1 says: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (NAB). In this sentence only the notions of heavens and earth are familiar to humans. The notions of "beginning," "God," and "creation" are not. Each notion in this text has a referent in reality. But what is that referent. To decide the meaning of the ideas of beginning, God, and creation we need to move beyond Genesis, beyond the Old Testament, into the New Testament, and beyond the literary or textual connectivity required by the textual nature of exegesis into thought connectivity. The methodology of systematic theology is specifically designed to discover and justify these sorts of connections. Traditionally, theologians have allowed philosophy or science to decide the meaning of these notions (beginning, God, creation). An Adventist systematic theology will decide the meaning of these notions from the wealth of revealed wisdom that we find in Scripture.

Returning to the Sanctuary, we know, for instance, that the Adventist doctrine of the Sanctuary includes the interpretation of Daniel 8:14 which calls for a pre-advent investigative judgment that begins in 1844 and takes place in heaven. Additionally, Adventists believe that this work of investigation involves the direct activity of the Trinity and is essentially related to the work of salvation. The sanctuary doctrine involves much more than these few general aspects, yet they are enough to help us understand why the Adventist formulation of the Sanctuary doctrine requires the application of the methodology of systematic theology.

Adventism has extensively discussed the matter of time, but failed to give the same importance to the matter of place. Let us focus for a minute not on the date, but on the place of the investigative judgment. Since I have dealt with this issue elsewhere, here a brief reference will suffice.<sup>26</sup> Following the text, biblical theology usually seems pleased with stating that the heavenly investigative judgment is the correct interpretation of Daniel 8:14. Starting from this conclusion of biblical theology, systematic theology approaches the biblical doctrine of the investigative judgment not as literary text, but as a complex of ideas which

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<sup>26</sup>See Fernando L. Canale, "Philosophical Foundations and the Biblical Sanctuary," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 36/2 (1998): 183-206.

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say something about a reality. This perspective immediately leads the systematist to analyze the doctrine from the viewpoint of its referents. Let us consider, for instance, the referent about place, namely heaven.

Systematic methodology requires the identification of all biblical texts and notions that bear on the biblical understanding of heaven. This is not equal to a simple gathering of biblical statements on heaven. The application of the methodology of systematic theology to the understanding of the Sanctuary leads by referential connection to heaven, which, in order to be clarified, leads also by referential connection to the understanding of the nature of God, who is supposed to act in heaven. It leads to the Trinitarian nature of God, who is directly involved in the investigative process. It leads to the nature of salvation, and so on. Each issue systematically connected with the understanding of the Sanctuary doctrine is to be retrieved and connected by systematic theology, in reference to the entire scope of biblical revelation. This methodology also calls for the collection and comparison of existing interpretations on the same issue in the history of Christian theology.

This probe generates interesting findings adding to the interpretation and understanding of the Sanctuary doctrine. When the results of the biblical understanding, exegeted and systematized, are compared with the understanding developed throughout the history of doctrinal formulations, we discover that Scripture conceives heaven as a place within creation, while classical, modern, and postmodern theologians believe that heaven is not a place, but a spiritual relation to God, Who has neither space nor time. Regarding salvation, something similar takes place. While Scripture seems to present various and consecutive actions of God, who works out salvation through a historical process, most Christians believe that salvation is the eternal work of God, consequently making any historical process of salvation either in heaven or earth impossible. This stark difference directly results from the almost generalized traditional conviction that the real referents of biblical teachings should be interpreted from the perspective of nonbiblical philosophical thinking. Conversely, Adventist systematic theology defines the referents of biblical teachings from the notions explicitly or implicitly espoused by biblical writers.

When the referent of the idea of salvation is investigated with the same systematic methodology, similar results come into view. Salvation is conceived as one complete eternal act of God. This act is understood as God's eternal justification, primarily revealed in the divine act on the cross. Again, this is a very complex issue. When the Adventist teaching of an investigative judgment is probed from the viewpoint of its salvific referent, the idea of judgment must be necessarily connected with the notion of justification by faith. Moreover, when the salvific referent of the Sanctuary doctrine is interpreted in the Protestant-Evangelical tradition of justification by faith, a serious conflict arises. Simply put, the conflict is the following. If salvation is the eternal act of God's sovereign predestination, revealed at the cross and experienced as justification by

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faith, the notion of a process of investigation of the saints becomes not only meaningless but contradictory. Sooner or later one of the two teachings needs to be modified. Evangelical theologians modified the Sanctuary doctrine by reducing it to a literary expression that uplifts the central doctrine of justification by faith alone. Besides, the very idea of judgment contradicts the Evangelical notion of the assurance of salvation.

This systematic analysis of ideas helps us understand why conservative Protestant theologians cannot find the Adventist teaching on the sanctuary in Scripture. The parting of the ways between Adventist and Evangelical theologians on the sanctuary doctrine is not the result of different exegetical methodologies, but of different systematic methodologies. We differ not in the way we study the text, but in the way we connect the various parts of the biblical text and the overwhelming diversity of its referents. Systematic methodology also explains why Evangelical Adventists cannot perceive the doctrine of the Sanctuary in the Bible. Their view of salvation precludes them from accepting that biblical references to the Sanctuary may describe a real salvific activity of God other than justification by faith. Once this systematic position is explicitly or implicitly adopted, it systematically rules the interpretation of biblical texts in exegesis and biblical theologies.

For instance, even though Desmond Ford argues exegetically, his adoption of the classical Protestant view on the Sanctuary and rejection of the historicist method of prophetic interpretation ultimately rests on a systematic—not biblical or exegetical—methodology. Ford implicitly recognizes the role of the systematic methodology as he explains that “when the gospel of grace is understood, then that truth coordinates all other truths, including such apparently esoteric matters as prophecy and the human nature of our Lord.”<sup>27</sup> This brief example shows that we cannot ignore the role of systematic methodology either in the overall process of discovering biblical truth, or in the application of exegetical and biblical methodologies.

The methodology of systematic theology is also active in the conception and formulation of Adventist teachings, for instance our position on some health issues, entertainment, ecclesiology, eschatology, and worship. Adventists need to recognize that they do not arrive at some of their doctrinal positions by way of exegetical methodology alone, but also by connecting biblical data, thus utilizing patterns and rules that are not allowed in exegetical and biblical theologies. In this way the discovery of biblical truth is advanced. The fact that systematic tools and procedures are involved in the discovery of biblical truth does not render them “less biblical” than those that can be accessed by way of exegetical procedures.

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<sup>27</sup>Desmond and Gillian Ford, *The Adventist Crisis of Spiritual Identity* (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982), 80; see also Desmond Ford, *Daniel 8:14 The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgement* [Casselberry, FL: Euangelion Press, 1980], i).

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The need for an Adventist systematic theology can also be perceived as we survey the present status of Adventist theology. Since the sixties Adventist theology has been undergoing a slow but steady process of theological fragmentation. In essence, historical, evangelical, and progressive Adventisms are attempts at grasping the Christian message systematically. Inadvertently, however, such attempts draw the principles for inner coherence and articulation from theologies that, in turn, base their theological understanding on nonbiblical philosophical ideas. They could greatly benefit from a consistent and critical application of the hermeneutics of suspicion I have recommended earlier.

Finally, pastors and evangelists, by the nature of their tasks, which consist in applying the total coherence of the biblical message into the everyday experience of believers and nonbelievers, function more as systematicians than exegetes or biblical theologians. The mission of the Church, then, also points to the need that systematics should be actively involved in the discovery of biblical truths.<sup>28</sup>

In concluding this section, it seems reasonable to suggest that the systematic nature of several doctrines held by Adventism, the systematic motivation of the theological fragmentation presently developing within Adventism, and the systematic nature of the proper task of pastors and evangelists point to the need that systematic theology should be integrated as a necessary component of the Adventist theological encyclopedia.

#### **The Basis for Making Room for Systematics in Adventist Theology**

Systematics has always been conducted on the basis of a humanly-originated philosophical system. Conversely, faithfulness to its scriptural ground has consistently prevented Adventist theology from intentionally utilizing humanly-originated philosophical systems. The only way Adventism could make room for systematics is by reinterpreting the system on which systematics works on the basis of Scripture. If Adventism were to make room for systematics without reinterpreting the system on a biblical basis, it would destroy the very reason of its existence.

If, on the basis of the argument of need briefly explored in the preceding section, we rush to open the disciplinary room for systematics in Adventist theology, by-passing the preliminary task of dealing with the issue of philosophy from critical and biblical perspectives, the most important reason for a negative answer to our question would have been ignored. Accepting systematics within Adventist theology while ignoring the preliminary task of addressing and answering, in a biblical way, the question of the system, will prove to be more detrimental to Adventism than denying systematics, for the time being, a place among the other theological disciplines. A hermeneutics of suspicion, then, is

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<sup>28</sup>On the important relationship that exists between the interpretation of the theological encyclopedia and the training of pastors, see Richard Muller, vii-xvii.

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not enough. The only ground on which there is room systematics in Adventist theology is the discovery and technical formulation of the biblical system. This point cannot be overemphasized. I am convinced that if Adventist theology opens its doors to a systematic theology whose operative principles are derived from any sort of human philosophy, very soon Adventism will become a subspecies of Evangelicalism, losing in the process not only its identity and uniqueness, but also the reason for its existence and mission.

Since Adventist theology stands or falls on the *sola Scriptura* principle, it seems clear that systematics can find disciplinary room within Adventist theology only under the condition that its system be drawn from Scripture itself. The redefinition of the system hangs on the question of whether a biblical philosophy is possible.

This can only be answered by exploring the biblical system of thought. I envision the opening of a disciplinary room for systematics in Adventist theology only on the twin bases of the existence and technical retrieval of the biblical system. Until such a step is accomplished, I believe it is advisable that Adventist theologians conduct their theological enterprise within the scholarly quarters of exegetical and biblical theologies and by following the hermeneutic of suspicion whenever the application of the methodology of systematic theology becomes indispensable. This statement should not be interpreted as a call for or encouragement of the status quo, but rather as an invitation to be critical and to use caution in the way in which we build on the foundation of Christ, the prophets, and the apostles (1 Cor 3:10-15; Eph 2:20).

At this point I can only state that, in my opinion, there is such a thing as a biblical philosophy and a biblical system.<sup>29</sup> In Scripture, of course, neither the system nor the answers to classical philosophical issues are formulated in the technical language of the scholarly world. In spite of the everyday language in which they are expressed, there is certainly a biblical system—and a biblical answer to the classical questions raised by human philosophy. Both the system and the answers to the classical issues raised by human philosophy provide the

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<sup>29</sup>This is not only my opinion, but Ellen G. White's conviction. She states clearly that Scripture "unfolds a simple and complete system of theology and philosophy" (*FE*, 129). Scripture "contains philosophy the most profound; poetry the sweetest and the most sublime, the most impassioned and the most pathetic. Immeasurably superior in value to the productions of any human author are the Bible writings, even when thus considered; but of infinitely wider scope, of infinitely greater value, are they when viewed in their relation to the grand central thought. Viewed in the light of this thought, every topic has a new significance. In the most simply stated truths are involved principles that are as high as heaven and that compass eternity" (*CG*, 505). Again she advises us to "study your Bible. Study not the philosophy contained in many books, but study the philosophy of the Word of the living God" (*TMK*, 201). Specifically, E. G. White points out that "the Bible reveals the true philosophy of history" (*Ed*, 173). I have briefly expressed my position on this scholarly issue in *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1987), 285-409, and in "Revelation and Inspiration: Method for a New Approach," *AUSS* 31 (1993): 181-186.

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foundation not only for the discipline of systematics, but also for the entire Adventist theological encyclopedia.

#### **Conclusion**

The answer to the question regarding whether “there is room for systematics in Adventist theology” seems to require a positive answer. Systematic theology, however, is not to be conceived as being primarily an orderly and didactic exposition of Christian teachings, but rather as the disciplined attempt to grasp and formulate the inner and outer coherence of the total range of revealed data given to us in Scripture.

The actual development of an Adventist systematics requires a preliminary task, namely, the identification of the system and philosophical ideas on the basis of which biblical revelation was originally conceived. This task is to be accomplished within the area of fundamental theology. It seems, then, that in this, like many other issues belonging to the foundations of theology as an academic discipline, Adventism should not follow the facile route of uncritically assuming or adopting ready-to-use solutions available in the theological supermarket.

Making room for systematics as a necessary discipline within the Adventist theological encyclopedia implies a very important methodological conclusion: No theological discipline is self-sufficient for the scholarly task of discovering, understanding, formulating, and implementing the revealed truths of Christianity. In other words, Christian theology can only accomplish its goals by way of a team-effort, which should include not only the intellectual tasks performed at the seminary, but also the tasks performed by the entire Church at the local and universal levels.

It is through such a collegial effort of teaming up the various resources and disciplines of the seminary, university, administration, and local congregations that the unity of Christ in the Spirit will find a powerful way of expression in the secularized context in which Adventism has been asked to live and minister.

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