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Editorial: Maintaining the Conversation

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Guest Editorial

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Maintaining the Conversation

Churches and para-church bodies have used various means of damming (or is it damning?) the flow of conversation regarding controversial issues. Such methods have included the development of creedal statements, the marginalisation of heretics, through to the persecution and torture of dissenters. The articles in this edition of *Christian Spirituality and Science: Issues in the Contemporary World* illustrate the ongoing conversation within some sectors of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in regard to the interface of faith with science; particularly in the arena of Origins.

For Adventists, especially, this has long been a matter of discussion; even conflict. Such is not surprising in that anything less than a strictly literalistic reading of Genesis may be viewed as corrosive to the doctrine of the Sabbath; often viewed as the *raison d'être* of Adventism. How can churches, let alone individual Christians, guarantee continuing fruitful discussion when there is so much at stake?

It seems to me that the key to understanding the current Christian debate

concerning Origins is the relative weight that is given to the statements of Scripture (sometimes called the biblical propositions) and the phenomena of science (sometimes referred to as the evidence from science). Obviously, both dimensions have to be interpreted, but it does appear that biblical scholars and theologians often appeal to their scientific colleagues to reinterpret the scientific data while on the other hand the scientists retort: Why cannot the biblical data be reinterpreted?

A somewhat analogous situation pertains in regard to evangelical views of Scripture. For decades now Evangelicals have argued over the inerrancy of the Bible.¹ For the inerrantist, the biblical propositions that affirm the divine authorship of the Bible (e.g., 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21; and John 10:35) must hold sway over the phenomena of Scripture that may include, for instance, discrepancies between parallel historical accounts. Again, sometimes extreme heat results at the friction point where the propositions interface with the phenomena. At the risk of over-simplification, the

inerrantists effectively shut down the debate and even expelled some of their opponents from the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) by requiring an affirmation that any biblical discrepancies were not in the “original autographs.”² In fact, there was no longer any room for discussion since no one has access to the original biblical manuscripts and we probably would not recognise them should some hitherto undiscovered “originals” emerge.

An evangelical Christian may well ask: Shouldn't the authority of Scripture “trump” the authority of science every time? Well, yes and no! While we should highly value Martin Luther's Sola Scriptura principle, we should not discount the insights from all fields of human endeavour, including those from science. In reality, Luther's view of scriptural authority is rather more complex than “the Bible alone.” It is best seen within a “circle” of authority which saw Scripture as preeminent while highly valuing the traditions of the early church, his own interpretation and experience, and the consensual theology of Wittenberg.³ I have personally found the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”⁴ of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience helpful in the maintenance of a personal faith that is based in Scripture while not diminishing the insights of science. While tradition, reason, and experience are important sources for theological reflection, the Evangelical Christian

does not allow them to drown out the voice of Scripture. On the other hand, nor can Scripture be allowed to silence the voices from the other sides of the quadrilateral.⁵ While Scripture remains the ultimate authority, all sides of the “quadrilateral” must be part of the ongoing conversation.

Christian communities cannot allow their committed members to be marginalised just because they are speaking from a perspective that challenges the status quo. Certainly, Christian history reveals that stymieing dialog within the church has proven tragic for its ability to interact meaningfully with the society that surrounds it. May we maintain the flow of conversation as we listen carefully to each other.

REFERENCES

¹ The most polemical artefact of the conflict over inerrancy among conservative Christians probably remains Lindsell, H. (1976). *The Battle for the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² The current Constitution of the ETS states in regard to Scripture: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs” (see www.etsjets.org/about/constitution#A3, (18/11/2014)). For an understanding of the “intent and meaning” of biblical inerrancy, the ETS refers its members to the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1978). For the text of this statement see www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf.

(17/11/2014).

³ Grislis, E. (1988). Martin Luther—Cause or Cure of the Problem of Authority. *Consensus: A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology* 14,37.

⁴ Albert C. Outler is credited with coining this description of John Wesley's approach to theology. See Outler, A. C. (1985). The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley. *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20(1), 17. For a detailed description of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, see Thorsen, D. C. (1990). *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ See, for instance, Clark H. Pinnock's discussion of the interaction between Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in Pinnock, C. H. (1990). *Tracking the Maze: Finding our Way through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 175-79. For my own evaluation of Pinnock's approach see McIver, R. K. and Roennfeldt, R. C. W. (2009). Text and Interpretation: Christian Understandings of Authoritative Texts in the Light of Social Change, *Islam and Christian – Muslim Relations* 20(3), 268-71.