

# ABC Theology

Review by Wayne Judd

*The Demons Have Had It: A Theological ABC*  
by Charles Scriven  
Southern Publishing Association, 125 pp.,  
\$3.95.

*The Demons Have Had It* is Charles Scriven's *Mere Christianity*. His themes are revelation, inspiration, law, repentance, conversion, sanctification, election, judgment and resurrection. In footnotes to his ten chapters, he includes Macquarrie, Barth, Niebuhr, Pascal, Gilkey, Kierkegaard, Tillich, Bonhoeffer and many others. He uses 89 Bible references and two Ellen White comments, suggesting that he takes Mrs. White's *sola scriptura* stance seriously. To squeeze all this into 125 pages is a hazardous undertaking, which Scriven acknowledges: "I have written a very short book about Christianity. It is not a complete account, only a beginning of sorts — a cup of water, not the reservoir. I intend simply that my readers taste what (as far as I can tell) Christian faith really is, instead of what popular caricatures make it out to be. I want to show what it means for our existence now — to say, among other things, that it is indeed not 'just another form of giving up the present for some goal'" (p. 14).

Little need be written about Chuck Scriven's style. He does not know how to be drab. His large ideas are easy to read. Even his weaker concepts and traditional notions are well dressed. He does not pretend to

develop a system, though perhaps he will (and should) if members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continue to show a growing interest in theology.

Because his work is fresh, it deserves to be read with a critical eye. His conversational, first-person approach invites congenial disagreement. (This attitude is enhanced by his introductory bow to three "where-are-they-now" scholars, Roy Branson, Edward Vick and Harold Weiss.) Obviously, Scriven has learned that to do theology, one must listen as well as talk.

The author has sought out questions for which easy answers are not readily available. Is God a psychological myth? Why do some fortunate ones know Him while others do not? What is man? What is sin? What does love require? What does it mean to overcome sin in the life? Is there a cure for evil, or does God "just forgive us of it when it happens?" (p. 89). Why take the Sabbath seriously? Does life have ultimate meaning?

While Scriven's answers to these questions do not always take us to the frontiers of contemporary theology, he does take us where the majority of Seventh-day Adventist have never been before, and in this, he fulfills his priestly objective to be a "middleman" between scholars and nonscholars (p. 10).

Still, some readers may object to some of his positions. For example, his doctrine of man hints at a rejection of reformation orthodoxy. What he says is not as significant as what he does not say. He refuses to declare that man is incapable of the good, saying instead that the good has never been "easy" for us (p. 40). While his strong social orienta-

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tion, which derives from love, is clearly supportable by Scripture, his reluctance to declare man depraved is not.

Someone will also ask why, in reference to language about God, “the most serious question, perhaps, arises from the practice of referring to God in the masculine gender” (p. 23). Scriven borrows a concept from Emil Brunner to clarify: “God is always more than any human language—whether words or sculpture or painting—can ever express. God is God — not one *thing* among other things. God is only Himself, and human language can never perfectly represent Him” (p. 25; cf. Brunner, *Our Faith*, pp. 1, 2).

He will probably be challenged by extremists on both ends of the sanctification continuum, since he refuses either to demand perfection or to insist on hopeless and continuing sinfulness. His delightful vacillation on the issue suggests that he is really aware of the ultimate practical irrelevance of the whole matter, since, of course, the issue of the perfectly sanctified person is humanly unanswerable and immeasurable.

Chapter six, “Christian Morals: A New Kind of Loving,” is at once a chapter of strength and weakness, strong because of his superb definition of *agape* love (though, in fact, New Testament love is not new at all), and weak because of his ethical application of this love. In definition, he declares, “*Agape* means, quite simply, a concern for your neighbor whether he is attractive or not. . . . It is a love that takes the initiative. . . . Going into the world, sacrificing for it, even dying for it — this is what the gospel demands. . . . If you (or your company or government) operate purely from the standpoint of your own advantage — loving only when love is safe and pleasant — no real risks are taken and no genuinely new achievements of brotherhood can occur” (pp. 69-71).

In his ethical development of this great principle, Scriven cites the involvement of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the plot against Hitler — a plot to murder. While Bonhoeffer was hardly one to break the commandment protecting human life, the circumstances demanded a higher ethic than the one that says, “Thou shalt not kill.” Scriven appropriately defends Bonhoeffer’s choice, based on the

*agape* ethic, since “only love has ultimate authority” (p. 76). He continues, “Fortunately, he could turn to the law of love and make it the final arbiter — the head umpire, we might say — in the process of moral decision. *Agape* asked him to take the initiative *for others* and not to retreat from reality” (p. 77). Then, suddenly, in a bizarre twist of the pen, he writes, “But let’s make one thing clear, too. If the resistance in Germany had successfully assassinated Hitler, it would very certainly have been a tragedy. For Hitler was faced with struggles and hopes and disappointments as important to him as ours are to us. He, too, was a person of worth and possibility. Had he been assassinated, it would have nullified, cruelly and suddenly, his potential for change, repentance and growth” (p. 77). His point is to show that even though the law of love is ultimate, “some pain, some evil, will result” when any law is broken (p. 77).

**M**easured against contemporary theology, *The Demons Have Had It*, is a tame, conservative effort. But compared to other books published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it will sound like a new voice. Which raises two questions: Who is the book for, and what is the future of theology in the Church?

The book should be read by busy pastors and probing lay people. It should be on the reading lists for college religion classes. The book speaks primarily to those who are already residents in the household of faith, though it certainly does not exclude the non-Seventh-day Adventist reader. Indeed, expanded marketing efforts for denominational publications could make this volume accessible to all thoughtful Christians.

And what of theology’s future in Adventism? Clearly, the Church’s laity reveals a growing interest in theology. Unfortunately, this interest focuses more on the often careless theology contained on cassette tapes than it does on worthwhile books. Perhaps this trend will reverse, and the reluctance of the church to plow new theological topsoil will gradually yield to the sometimes forsaken truth that truth is progressive.