



# Responding to Pipim and Scriven

Steve Dailey, David Larson, Kenneth Noel, and Alden Thompson debate Adventist interpretations of Scripture.

## En Route to a “Plain Reading” of Scripture

by Alden Thompson

Both Samuel Koranteng-Pipim and I cherish Scripture, belong to the same church, love the same Lord, and long for his return. But Pipim is unhappy with my book *Inspiration, and Receiving the Word* tells why. Now, with hard copy in hand, we can look for common ground, my purpose in this brief critique.

For me his book is valuable in two major respects. First, the response to the book makes it a powerful diagnostic tool, revealing the arguments and rhetoric that find a home in Adventism. Second, it is a clarion call for the “plain reading” of Scripture, a great line, and one with which I wholeheartedly concur.<sup>1</sup>

But the “plain reading” of Scripture is precisely what divides us. What seems plain to me is a threat for him, a threat to the essential historicity of

key biblical events, to our convictions that God is involved in history and human lives (providence), and to Adventist beliefs and practices.

Surprisingly, Pipim almost never quarrels with my reading of the text. His concern seems to be that I too eagerly point out where one “plain reading” differs from another “plain reading” in the same Bible. He needs to harmonize. I do not—and let me explain why, lest I appear to be a nasty critic bent on destroying faith. My goal is to build faith, and to that end I believe there are powerful reasons for the “differences” in Scripture.

### Valuable Differences

**D**IFFERENT NEEDS. Speaking directly about the *differences* between Bible writers, Ellen White said: “The Lord gave His word in just the way He wanted it to come,” noting that

the differing perspectives “meet the necessities of varied minds.”<sup>2</sup> Adventists have always said that God chose a mediated form of revelation to preserve our freedom. Blasts and blazes were rare (e.g., Sinai, Damascus Road); instead, a wide variety of messengers matched the needs of a wide variety of people.

**CHANGING TIMES.** In the Old Testament, foreign wives were accepted, forbidden, accepted, then forbidden again—depending on the circumstances.<sup>3</sup> In the New Testament, food offered to idols was first forbidden (Acts 15) and then tolerated with a people-sensitive, Spirit-guided shrug (1 Corinthians 8). A “plain reading” of Scripture keeps such passages in place—to help monitor the differences between the likes of Brother Thompson and Brother Pipim.

**DEFINING THE LIMITS OF “HUMANITY” IN SCRIPTURE.** When several witnesses describe the same event, the Lord reveals “naturally” the limits of the human element in Scripture. If Bible writers can be seen to be using

"ordinary speech," the "plain reading" of Scripture is not at risk. Major events stand clear and firm, but we allow for what Edwin Thiele, the respected Adventist chronologist, called "certain slight imperfections due to the fallacies of human hands."<sup>4</sup>

Now the model that allows me to see such differences and thus to revel in the "plain reading" of Scripture, is suggested by Ellen White when she shifts the emphasis from the inspired word to the inspired person. ("It is not the words . . . that are inspired, but the men that were inspired"<sup>5</sup>). Every word still remains crucial and unchanged ("No man can improve the Bible by suggesting what the Lord meant to say or ought to have said"<sup>6</sup>). But recognizing that the Spirit inspired people, instead of words, allows us to admit to the gap between the human words and God himself ("God and heaven alone are infallible."<sup>7</sup>) Ellen White herself said that the Lord speaks in "imperfect" speech because of our "degenerate senses" and "dull, earthly perception." Yet the Bible is still "perfect" in its "simplicity"—an adapted perfection, not an absolute one, for "infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought."<sup>8</sup>

And Scripture illustrates how a flawed humanity can actually enhance the power of the message. In 1 Corinthians 1:10 to 17, for example, Paul desperately wants to say that he hadn't baptized anyone so that no one could claim baptism in Paul's name—and Paul does stake his claim. But then his memory improves, and before he is through, he admits to baptizing Crispus, Gaius, the household of Stephanas, "and beyond that I do not know whether I baptized anyone else" (vs. 17, NRSV). His message is clear—and his stumbling endears him to us as a real human being on fire for God.

But those observations and implications are not helpful for Pipim, for his moral universe is dependent on absolutely correct information, a model reinforced in this century by oft-repeated fundamentalist rhetoric: "God's absolute test of Scripture is its accuracy." And "If God had gotten the names mixed up we should throw away our Bible."<sup>9</sup> That's the rhetoric we're up against.

## Significant Concessions

But Pipim's armor is not without cracks, hints that the Lord may yet lead us onto common ground. I cite three examples where Pipim departs significantly from his all-or-nothing stance.

THE HOW OF INSPIRATION. In a helpful corrective to the popular view that all Scripture came by way of vision, Pipim differentiates three basic methods by which inspiration operates: "visions and dreams," "reflection on nature and human experience," and "historical research," adding that the Bible writers used "sources" in their research.<sup>10</sup> That seems to legitimate "source criticism"—according to his mentor, the late Gerhard Hasel,<sup>11</sup> one of the "forbidden" methods linked with the so-called historical-critical method.

TRANSLATIONS. Pipim's remarkably broad position on translations allows the Spirit to use the New World Translation (Jehovah's Witnesses) and the Clear Word (Jack Blanco).<sup>12</sup> At mid-century, conservatives loved lower (text) criticism (transmission and translation of biblical text) and despised higher criticism (authorship, literary analysis, and historicity). But then conservatives discovered that text criticism is a powder keg—and the power to translate is the power to interpret and to change. The current "King James only" movement

reflects that new deep-seated conservatism.<sup>13</sup> Had Pipim been consistent with his own statement on translations, the tone and content of his book would have been quite different.

CASEBOOK VS. CODEBOOK. Although rejecting my "casebook" approach to Scripture, Pipim adopts a remarkably similar stance when interpreting Proverbs 26:4 and 5 ("Answer not a fool . . . /Answer a fool . . ."): "Sometimes your answer to a fool can make you look like a fool; at other times, your answer will help him; therefore be careful how you answer a fool."<sup>14</sup> Amen. That's a casebook approach. Maybe common ground is not far away.

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1. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Berean Books, 1996), pp. 31-35. The section entitled, "The Historic Adventist Approach: Plain Reading of Scripture" (pp. 31-33), is followed by one entitled "The Contemporary Liberal Approach: The Historical-Critical Method" (pp. 33-35).

2. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1958), Book 1, pp. 21, 22.

3. Deuteronomy 7:3 forbids marriage with non-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan, though Moses had a non-Israelite Cushite wife (Numbers 12). Deuteronomy 23:3-6 prohibits ties with Moabites and Ammonites "to the tenth generation." Yet Ruth was a Moabite (Ruth 1:4) and Rehoboam's mother was Naamah the Ammonite (I Kings 14:21), both in the royal lineage from which Jesus was born. At the time of Ezra-Nehemiah (ca. 450 B.C.), foreign wives were dismissed on the basis of Mosaic legislation (Ezra 10, Nehemiah 13).

4. Both Gerhard Hasel (*Understanding the Living Word of God*, [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1980], pp. 57, 58) and Pipim (pp. 316-319) cite Edwin Thiele (*Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951]) as a faithful Adventist scholar who refused to admit "error" in Scripture. But when Thiele's second edition noted an "error" in connection with Hezekiah, Gleason Archer reviewed the book in *Christianity Today* (April 15, 1966), accusing Thiele of

abandoning inerrancy and leaving Christians "with all the grave consequences ensuing from a partially erroneous Bible." Thiele replied: "On the one hand are those who feel that the chronological data of Kings cannot possibly be as accurate as my work has shown them to be, and on the other hand are the few who regard as altogether inerrant a volume in which I admit certain slight imperfections due to the fallacies of human hands" (*Christianity Today*, June 10, 1966). In short, those who deny the supernatural or those who claim inerrancy have difficulty with the "plain reading" of Scripture.

5. *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 21.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

7. —, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 37.

8. *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 22.

9. The quotes are from John MacArthur, *Is the Bible Reliable?* (pp. 121, 128), a book now available only on tape (Grace to You, P.O. Box 4000, Panorama City, CA 91412). A popular southern California dispensational fundamentalist, MacArthur is a not-infrequent visitor in Pipim's footnotes.

10. Pipim, pp. 48, 49.

11. Hasel's all-or-nothing position comes in a quote from Ernst Troeltsch,

the acknowledged "father" of the historical-critical method: "The theologian or exegete must not get the impression that he can safely utilize certain parts of the historical-critical method in an eclectic manner, because there is no stopping point: 'Whoever lends it a finger must give it a hand'" (Hasel, p. 26). Hasel's catalog of (forbidden) methods includes source criticism and redaction criticism (Hasel, p. 28).

12. Pipim, pp. 234, 235.

13. See, for example, G. A. Riplinger, *New Age Bible Versions* (Munro Falls, Ohio: AV Publications, 1993). A subtitle on the front cover announces "The New Case Against the NIV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV, NAB, REB, RSV, CEV, TEV, GNE, Living, Phillips, New Jerusalem, and New Century." For a competent response from an evangelical perspective, see James K. White, *The King James-Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995).

14. Pipim, p. 283.

*Alden Thompson, professor of biblical studies at Walla Walla College, received his doctorate from Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, Scotland. He is the author of Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1991).*

## Shrinking the Carpenter's Toolbox

by Steve Dailly

I believe that God has a big toolbox; I believe that his kingdom is furthered by diversity. The kingdom of God is richer for our various denominations; it is richer for the diversity that exists in our various Adventist colleges and universities; it is richer for the ethnic diversity that we find on our campus; and it is richer for the diversity of views that exist between the "liberal left" and the "reactionary right"—providing that these differences can be expressed in a spirit of tolerance and honesty.

The problem is that right-wing theology by its very nature tends to be dogmatic, monolithic, and intolerant. I affirm Pipim's right to express his views, but I also think he

must be held accountable where his words misrepresent what others have said, including what I said in my book *Adventism for a New Generation*.

### Noble Bereans or Negative Brethren?

The primary point that Pipim keeps coming back to in his book is that there is a crisis over the Word in Adventism that has been generated by "contemporary liberal approaches to the Bible" in our ranks, and the application of higher criticism and the "historical-critical method" of interpretation to Scripture and the writings of Ellen White.

Unlike the Bereans, whom Paul praised for being receptive to his

new message—and with whom Pipim identifies—*Receiving the Word* is a book of labels and accusations that seems to cleverly misrepresent people much better than it describes their actual views. Since Pipim dedicated an entire chapter to my book, *Adventism for a New Generation*, under the generous heading "Departing From the Word," I will hold him accountable for the personal misrepresentations that I found. I will briefly respond to the charges and accusations that he makes.

1. *He charges that I read Scripture through a "higher-critical lens" that results, not in perception, but in "blindness and deception" (pp. 181).* This is a remarkable charge, given that I have rejected the higher-critical approach to Scripture just as consistently as a literalistic, legalistic approach. In all three of my books I advocate a Christ-centered approach to the Bible that fully acknowledges that all Scripture is inspired. At the same time, I hold that God's highest revelation has been given through Christ, and that all of Scripture must be studied, understood, and interpreted ultimately through the words and acts of Jesus (which I take to be fully authentic as they stand in Scripture).

2. *In several places he charges that I reject a "Bible-based lifestyle" (pp. 183f).* By this he means that I do not share his strong emphasis on externals such as jewelry, dress, diet, etc., and argues from one quote taken out of context that my "position is not based on Scripture, but on listening to young people and my own experience." Such a conclusion must be based on either deliberate distortion or scholarly incompetence, for if he read my book he would have noted that I repeatedly emphasize that our standards must be based on biblical principles (pp. 20, 270, etc.), and not just traditions or subcultural norms.

3. *He charges that I advocate a "New morality on premarital sex and*

masturbation" (p. 184). Again, Pipim shows an expertise for misrepresentation and taking passages out of their proper context. Anyone reading his book would get the impression that I encourage or advocate premarital sex and masturbation, when in reality my book encourages neither of these, and takes a very conservative and balanced position with regard to both.

4. *Pipim charges that "week after week each Sabbath" I "led students" in our Adventist university to "clean the streets, paint houses and lay foundations" (p. 193).* Here is another example of Pipim totally misrepresenting my views. Even the most superficial reading of the pages he quotes in my book to support this statement prove it to be nothing but a lie. In the 17 years I have served as a campus chaplain we have taken students out on Sabbath afternoon to help with emergency clean-up after floods, earthquakes, or riots five or six times, and on rare occasions we have helped a handicapped person or widow with his or her house or yard in a non-emergency context. These latter forms of service have never occurred more than once in a year and have been exceptional, rewarding, and greatly appreciated. Yet Pipim states, with nothing to back it up, that we have become the city's Saturday street cleaning and construction crew on a weekly basis.

There are many other examples I could give of his gross misrepresentations. When I realized how flagrantly he distorted my views in his book, I could only assume that his attacks on so many other schol-

ars and church leaders were equally inaccurate and misinformed. If this is the kind of research and scholarship that we are to expect from our Andrews University doctoral students, then I think it is safe to say that the future of our church is in jeopardy.

## A Tare-able Parable

As I read through the pages of Pipim's book, I was struck by how he defines Adventism and the kingdom of God so narrowly that none but his own theological clones may enter in. This is always the case with those who condemn and seek to remove their fellow believers in Christ in the name of theological purity. Which is why Jesus told a very important parable (ignored by Pipim in his book) that must seem terrible to those committed to cleansing the church of theological diversity.

The message couldn't be any clearer. A man (Jesus) sowed his field with good seed, and at night his enemy (the devil) came and planted weeds or tares in the same field. When the sabotage became apparent his servants (disciples or church members) asked, "Shall we pull up the weeds?" The Master's answer was a very clear: "... No. For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them" (Matthew 13:29, NRSV). Yet Pipim, who prides himself in living by the Word, has chosen to become a full-fledged "Theological Orkin Man." His mission, to exterminate every heretical tare or pest, ironically leads him to repeatedly violate Jesus' clear command to let the wheat and the tares grow together.

## The Carpenter Has A Big Toolbox

Jesus modeled and taught inclusivity. Jesus continually marveled at the faith he found among

the Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors (Zaccheus), and prostitutes (Mary). He even singled out a Roman centurion as having greater faith than anything he had ever seen in all of Israel (Matthew 8:10). In response to Israel's strong ethnocentricity, Jesus said, "I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven: But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:11, 12, KJV).

Yet Pipim insists that an openness to God's people in other movements (spiritual ecumenicity), and criticism of Adventism's exclusive claim to being the "Remnant Church," is "revisionism" and part of the liberal agenda leading church members down a path of deception. He fails to address any of the many passages where Jesus and the Bible writers warn against exclusivity and isolationism.

Jesus was not just a carpenter by profession, he was a "spiritual carpenter" as well. Here was a man who generally devoted his life to building people up—especially the poor, widow, orphan, stranger, the disenfranchised, and the outcast. Here was a man who had a huge "spiritual toolbox," that allowed him to constantly reach out and touch all kinds of "untouchables" from the perspective of the religious establishment. *Receiving the Word* seems committed to shrinking the carpenter's toolbox to fit a "vision" of Adventism that is both self-centered and self-serving. The good news is that Jesus is still alive and his toolbox is bigger than ever before.

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*Steve Daily is chaplain and a member of the faculty of the school of religion at La Sierra University. He is the author of Adventism for a New Generation (Portland/Clackamas, Oregon: Better Living Publishers, 1993).*



# Please Define *Fundamentalism*

by Kenneth Noel

Charles Scriven's article, "Embracing the Spirit" (*Spectrum*, Vol. 26, No. 3), uses the word *fundamentalism* or its derivative at least 37 times, but nowhere does he define what fundamentalism is. He says it leads toward a flat reading of the Word and the use of "proof texts," and similar epithets, but he left me without an understanding of the error he was trying to expose in Samuel Koranteng-Pipim's book.

*Fundamentalism* is such a nebulous term that, unless a person defines what he means by it, it is impossible for the one so accused to defend himself. One might as well try to fight against fog. It is everywhere and nowhere.

I grew up when *liberalism* was a bad word. I related it to all the myriad errors that come from Sunday-keeping churches, strange ideas that come from errors in prophetic interpretation, and the "once saved, always saved" theology.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is an adherence to tried and

true ideas that forbids exploration of new ideas. I remember when Uriah Smith's exposition of Daniel and Revelation said that Turkey was the King of the North. Anyone who dared to dispute that was certain to be called a heretic by old ministers who had grown up with that interpretation.

Since when is it wrong to try to defend historic doctrines? Since when is it an error to espouse interpretations that differ in degree from the historic stand but do not do injustice to the basic overall doctrine?

I found Pipim's book to be thought-provoking and cogent. It allows a person to have a slightly different opinion without being called a heretic or a liberal. His chapter on "Wrestling With the Word" is especially interesting. It shows that the mine of truth is inexhaustible, and opposite to dogmatic adherence to set ideas of fundamentalism.

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*Kenneth Noel, a graduate of Walla Walla College, retired from a career as an engineer for the space program. He lives in Madison, Alabama.*

cism" in the first sense or accepts it in the second.

A second key note is that of the "historical-critical method." Many use this term as an umbrella notion to cover both "higher criticism" and "lower criticism" as defined above in the first alternative. Others also use it as an umbrella term, this time one that covers both types of inquiry as carried out in harmony with the presuppositions mentioned in the previous paragraph's second option.

I am aware of no Seventh-day Adventist theologian anywhere in the world who rejects the "historical-critical method" in the first sense or accepts it in the second.

A third key note is that of *sola scriptura*, what Pipim calls "the sole authority of the Bible." Like Martin Luther, with whom this expression is often associated, many hold that it means that Christians have a number of legitimate sources of truth, but that the one that is the most authoritative is Scripture. Others claim that it means that all of our religious beliefs and practices, without a single exception, must be derived wholly and solely from Scripture and absolutely nothing else.

I am aware of no Seventh-day Adventist theologian anywhere in the world who rejects *sola scriptura* in the first sense or accepts it in the second.

I feel confident that even Pipim, like all of his colleagues in Adventist theology of whom I have knowledge, accepts "higher criticism," the "historical-critical method," and *sola scriptura* in their first sense and rejects them in their second.

Surely this much hermeneutical harmony in a community of faith as culturally diverse as ours deserves at least three hosannas!

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*David Larson received his Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate School. He is professor of Christian ethics and co-director of the Center for Christian Bioethics, Loma Linda University.*

## Three Hosannas for Harmony

by David R. Larson

Contrary to what I gathered from Samuel Koranteng-Pipim's response to Charles Scriven (*Spectrum*, Vol. 26, No. 3), it seems to me that the worldwide choir of Adventist theologians sings in hermeneutical harmony. To be sure, harmony is not uniformity, but neither is it dissonance, let alone cacophony. But even when this is granted, on at least three of the key notes that Pipim strikes, this harmony is so close as to amount to unison.

One of these notes is the matter of "higher criticism." Many hold that

this term refers to the study of a passage's *context* (the times, places, circumstances, and agendas of its author and audience) while "lower criticism" refers to the study of a passage's *text* (the quantity and quality of its primary manuscripts and their variations). Others use the term "higher criticism" in reference to conclusions about such matters that conform to presuppositions that variously are materialistic, mechanistic, deterministic, individualistic, or methodologically atheistic.

I am aware of no Seventh-day Adventist theologian anywhere in the world who rejects "higher criti-