



## Biblical Authority

A Challenge to the Seminary | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**Read the story as a whole, and you see it as the record of a (fallen) people who, under God's Spirit, move, by fits and starts, in the direction of Christ.**

Exactly how should the Bible help me write the next chapter of my life? Exactly how should it help *us* write *ours*?

The question of biblical authority is the question of how to interpret Scripture for faithfulness in Christian life. If I grant the Bible authority—allow it to influence me, to be, in some sense, the *author* of my life—what exactly does that mean for how I apply what I read?

Judging from articles by two seminary teachers in the last issue of *Spectrum*, confusion about all this persists even where clarity matters most—at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Such confusion is by no means particular to Adventism, nor even, as far as I know, widespread at the Seminary. But it may show up wherever the Bible commands attention, and failure to correct it—especially in the training of Adventist ministers—puts at risk the Church's unity and mission alike.

In the article by Richard Davidson (first published in 1990, in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*), the author lays down his criticisms of the "historical-critical method." This is the approach to Scripture associated with modernity and the procedures of secular historical science, and in substantial part, Davidson's criticisms ring true, especially now that the self-assurance of modernity has begun to seem like arrogance. Davidson's republication of this essay is, in fact, a helpful beginning point for further conversation. Still, the alternative that he himself proposes is inadequate.

Davidson argues that no one true to the spirit of the Bible may read the book the way

practitioners of the historical critical method read it. The historical critics pick and choose among the Bible's parts for what has continuing validity. But human interpretation may not, Davidson insists, say that one "portion" is "authoritative" and another not: the whole Bible is inspired.

The trouble is that an adequate account of biblical authority requires a subtlety Davidson misses. And the danger in missing that subtlety is well-illustrated, just a few pages later, by Roy Gane's reflections on genocide in the Bible.

Gane makes note of several stories that say God *commanded* Israel to carry out the total annihilation of an enemy. In Deuteronomy 20, for example, God asks the children of Israel to "completely destroy" six different nations of Canaan. Numbers 33 and 1 Samuel 15 show God's readiness to punish those mandated to carry out wars of extermination. Why? For failing, as Gane says, to "shed the last drop of blood."

From all this, Gane concludes that when you believe (as he does) that the "entire Bible" is God's Word, you have no choice but to say that God "sometimes gives up on groups of people," and commissions others to commit genocide against them. Gane takes it for granted that, as a "true theocracy," Israel was acting for God—responding to "direct revelation from God"—when it engaged in genocidal violence. "When God tells you to do something, you do it," he writes; you do it even if it is "unusual and unpleasant," even if it "evokes revulsion and instant condemnation."

A theory of biblical authority that permits

these conclusions is worse than dubious: it is dangerous. To his credit, Gane himself seems uncomfortable with what he is saying, and as his essay ends, he alludes to the "truer religion" of Jesus with its ideal of "sacrificial love." Unfortunately, however, he makes no explicit case for why Jesus should trump the theocrats. Under the right conditions, God asks the faithful to annihilate whole peoples—and despite Gane's reservations, it is, even in his account, as simple as that.

What both Davidson and Gane overlook, or do not begin to say clearly, is this: In Christian Scripture, the *internal evidence* points unmistakably to a *Christ-centered* understanding of biblical authority.

The first Christians took Christ to be *the* criterion of their life and thought. Jesus—teacher and healer; the one crucified under Pilate and then resurrected—was God's human face. He was the Word made flesh, the visible image of the invisible divine, the exact imprint of God's very being (John 1; Colossians 1; Hebrews 1).

The resurrection made it so, or made it plain. Paul says the resurrection was God's declaration that Jesus is both Son of God and Lord of life (Romans 1). According to the first Gospel, the risen Christ declared: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28; compare Matthew 5).

There is no room here, none at all, for an *uncentered* view of biblical authority. But even if Gane seems uncomfortable with what an uncentered view entails, he and Davidson both say that the Bible is all authoritative, including all the bits and pieces. No "portion" (Davidson) lacks authority. Even if God issues a command that "evokes revulsion and instant condemnation" (Gane), the believer obeys. Under the right (theocratic) conditions a mandate to genocide is binding—the very Word of God.

Saying we no longer live under a theocracy, as Gane does, is no true help. For one thing, warlords, "legitimate" or otherwise, assume, all too easily, that they are God's appointed agents for another, this still leaves God and the risen Christ at odds—capable, at least in principle, of disagreeing.

Christian Scripture provides the solution: the authority of the Bible is *Christ-centered* authority. Recognizing this, and saying it clearly, is crucial—for Christian life it is as decisive as daylight. The uncentered account, after all, leaves us with a schizophrenic God, and with followers adrift and confused. With Christ effectively dethroned,

the Crusades may be a Christian mission; Nazis may sing carols on Christmas and carry out their grisly work the day after; churches may fly the flag and ask no questions.

And why not? God really does sanction war, and even genocide—you can read about it in the Bible.

The point is not, of course, that Davidson and Gane want such confusion to happen. They do not. The point is that the uncentered view of Scriptural authority opens the door to such confusion.

On the Christ-centered view, all Scripture—the whole story—is inspired; all Scripture—the whole story—is a revelation. But now you read the story as a *whole*, and you see it as the record of a (fallen) people who, under God's Spirit, move—slowly, and by fits and starts, in the direction of Christ. Surrounded at first by polytheistic violence, they do not really *bear* all that God hopes they will one day hear. Over time, however, adumbrations of an inclusive vision begin to appear; even nonviolence comes to be seen as potentially redemptive (Isaiah 19, 53, and 56).

Then you come to Christ, whose resurrection provides, at last, the hermeneutical key to interpreting the inspired story. That key is not my authority, or some scholar's authority, or some bureaucracy's authority; it is Christ's authority, and faithful Christian life becomes a matter, unmistakably, of following... Jesus. Now genocidal references come under the judgment of Christ. Now the vision of Jesus, including the vision of the Sermon on the Mount, becomes *the* criterion.

Professors at the seminary should be leading us, all of them, to see this. Otherwise, our ministers and congregations bend under the sway of Christ-defying temptation, not least the temptation to violence, or mindless support of violence, that so routinely beguiles the wider world.

Skeptics say, usually with a sneer, that you can argue anything you want to from the Bible. It isn't so, not when the authority of the book is seen through the eyes of Christ. These skeptics need to know that. And it is even more important, no doubt, that *we* know it. ■



**Charles Scriven** is president of the Kettering College of the Medical Arts and is president of Adventist Forums