



The Discussion about the Nature of God

(that inspired Scriven's editorial)

Screeching Tires

BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

September 6, 2006

IN THE SUMMER ISSUE of *Spectrum*, diverse perspectives on the interpretation of the Bible come across like tires screeching, and jerk you awake.

Richard Davidson and Roy Gane are of the same mind. All Scripture (Davidson) "transcends cultural backgrounds as timeless truth." The "entire Bible" (Gane) is the "Word of God." This is what I will call a "flat-line" account of scriptural authority. It's not just the Bible as a whole that defines Christian life, it's all the bits and pieces. Every book and text has equal sway.

This account leaves Gane troubled by a God who (in some Bible passages) endorses—mandates—genocide. The trouble comes because this claim about God must be seen as timeless truth. Under the correct theocratic conditions (as with Israel of old) the command to commit genocide is the very Word of God. So under the right conditions, genocide is God's truth.

Gane ends up, it is true, wishing people would embody the "truer religion" that reflects Christ's sacrificial love, but he provides no argument, certainly no biblical argument, for privileging Jesus over genocide. His account of the Bible won't let him.

In the same *Spectrum* issue Sigve Tonstad contends that, with its vision of reconciliation among Israel and its enemies, Egypt and Assyria, the book of Isaiah, in chapter 19, announces a wholly startling prospect. It is a "paradigm shift," an anticipation of Jesus' prayer on the cross for the forgiveness of his enemies (Luke 23:34).

Tonstad's view suggests an "ascending line" theory of Bible authority: understanding shifts to something different from, and sometimes better than, previous understanding. David Larson makes this "ascending line" premise explicit in his response to Gane, and quotes Hebrews 1 to say that the final measure of Christian truth is Christ. Thus, says Larson, genocide is never God's truth.

Luke reports Peter's saying that Jesus was raised up and "exalted at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:32, 33). John the Evangelist tells us not just that the "Word" is God, but also that it "became flesh" (so we can see) in Jesus (John 1:1, 14). The author of Hebrews declares that Jesus Christ, by contrast with other prophets, is the "exact imprint" of God's being; he declares further that Jesus Christ is the same "yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 1:3 and 13:8).

I do not know how Davidson and Gane read these passages, but I myself see them as support for Tonstad and Larson. What is more, my conclusion does

not depend on the "historical-critical method" (which Davidson anathematizes and I myself substantially reject). It depends only on an "ascending line," as opposed to "flat-line," theory of biblical authority. It assumes that the Bible is a story tending in the direction of God's ultimate revelation. It assumes, in other words, what the first Christians assumed, what the Radical Reformers assumed, what Adventists like John Weidner in Nazi Europe and Ginn Fourie in violence-torn South Africa assumed: Bible believers really can know God's true will because God's true will is the will of the resurrected Christ to whom the New Testament bears witness.

But the issues are complex, and I know it. Let me just say that unless Adventism is a lifeless shell—too dead to hear screeching tires—this cluster of articles should get attention and comment. That attention and comment should come from laypersons and scholars alike, and certainly from seminary professors.

Is the juxtaposition of the Davidson and Gane articles the death knell for the "flat-line" theory of the biblical authority? Or does it prove that we don't know—and cannot know—how to make a biblical argument against genocide?

If the latter is the case, what moral authority can our church possibly have? And why would our neighbors want to join us, or our kids want to stay?

Instruction from the Koran

BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

September 13, 2006

PERHAPS THE KORAN can sharpen our awareness on these matters.

From Gane's account, remember, you'd think God was schizophrenic. The Bible describes episodes of God-directed genocide, yet says that Jesus, the beloved Son in whom God was well-pleased, forgave his enemies and did no violence to them.

What to do?

Well, with Gane's (and Davidson's) flat-line view of the Bible's authority, every bit and piece is God's very truth, so the tension cannot be resolved—Gane seems to say he cannot resolve it—and God ends up divided.

George Packer, in the September 11 *New Yorker*, writes about Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, a scholar of the Koran who in 1985 was executed in Sudan for sedition and apostasy.

Taha had argued that the parts of the Koran revealed to Muhammad in Mecca, at the beginning, were the "supreme expression" of Islamic religion: suffused with kindness, the sense of freedom and equality, the ideal of peaceful coexistence of all with all. The later parts, revealed in Medina where Muhammad had established Islamic rule in a city full of Jews and pagans, were inferior: bristling with threats and the need for compulsion by the sword.

Although Taha's vision is alive today, it is little heeded.

Is the problem exactly similar to the one that puzzles Gane?

Not if you pay attention to the...text. To my (very limited) knowledge, nothing in the Koran permits you to argue, on the basis of evidence internal to that book, that the final Islamic truth is the truth of Mecca, not Medina. But the internal evidence in Scripture says that

God's final truth is Christ: if you have seen Jesus, says the New Testament in several ways and places, you have seen the Maker of heaven and earth.

The Word of God in Scripture thus points us, unmistakably, to God's Ultimate Word in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And God ceases to be divided.

Why should this be hard to see? And why should anyone who has faith in Christ resist seeing it?

Is anyone better able to advance this conversation than scholars and seminary professors? Considering genocidal violence today, is any conversation more important? We can all help, of course, but we need many of those who teach our children and our pastors to help, too. Can we not at last embrace, on this matter, a true dialogue of those concerned?

Agreement, Misrepresentations, and Disagreements

BY ROY GANE

September 13, 2006

I AGREE WITH Charles Scriven that in the current issue of *Spectrum* (34.3, summer 2006), "diverse perspectives on the interpretation of the Bible come across like tires screeching." You can almost smell the rubber burning!

Scriven reacts against articles by Richard Davidson on the authority of Scripture (38–45) and myself (Roy Gane) on Israelite genocide (61–65). Scriven agrees, on the other hand, with articles in the same issue by Sigve Tonstad on Isaiah (46–53) and David Larson, who responds to my article on genocide (66–69). As Scriven acknowledges, "the issues are complex."

Although Scriven's brief essay does not attempt to deal with the complexity, he briefly identifies what he sees as main issues at stake. I welcome this frank communication as helpful in

opening up further dialogue. So, accepting the challenge, here are a few of my own observations in response to both Scriven and Larson. First I will list some areas in which we agree. Then I will point out some issues that Larson and Scriven have misrepresented. Finally, I will identify what I believe to be the source of our disagreement.

AREAS OF AGREEMENT

1. I agree with Larson and Scriven that the character of God is central to the message of Scripture. In my teaching, preaching, and in several of my books (*Altar Call* [Diadem, 1999]; *Leviticus, Numbers* [NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 2004]; *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* [Eisenbrauns, 2005]; *Who's Afraid of the Judgment?* [Pacific Press, 2006]) I have repeatedly and emphatically emphasized that God's character of love (1 John 4:8) is the heart and basis of divinely revealed truth (compare Matt. 22:37–40).

2. I heartily agree that Christ is the paramount revelation of God's character (for example 2 Cor. 3).

3. I agree that divine revelation is progressive. God is continually leading his people to a higher standard (for example Isa.; Matt. 5). Examples could fill several volumes. As I have written in my article, God no longer mandates genocide.

4. I agree with Larson that we need to trace the trajectory of Scripture in order to follow the direction it is leading, even when this means moving beyond (but never contrary to, I would add) explicit statements of Scripture. For example, in the Bible there are no explicit divine commands prohibiting everyone from practicing all forms of slavery or polygamy under all circumstances.

However, we see in Scripture that

**Give me a
break, Chuck!
...If you don't
get the clear
message
that I privilege
Jesus over
genocide, read
my article
again.**

—Roy Gane

God did not initiate these institutions and did not like them. He undermined them by teaching the value of each human being, and regulated them to mitigate their worst effects in an age when completely abolishing them would have resulted in starvation for debt-servants and for rejected women. We correctly deduce that in harmony with the biblical message, Christians must never practice slavery or polygamy.

5. Larson accepts events of corporate destruction by God, such as Noah's flood, incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the ultimate annihilation of the wicked as compatible with God's character (68–69). I agree because God's love includes his justice as well as his mercy.

While he doesn't want any to perish (2 Pet. 3:9) and his retributive punishments are alien to his desires (compare Isa. 28:21—God's "strange act"), he ultimately does not allow individuals or groups who refuse to live in harmony with his law of love to continue disrupting the reign of love, which is the only principle on the basis of which intelligent beings with free choice can harmoniously co-exist and not ultimately destroy each other.

6. I agree with Larson that the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22) was never intended to teach that God commands people to do evil (including human sacrifice).

MISREPRESENTATIONS

1. Larson defines "genocide" narrowly as "the extermination of

entire groups with no regard for the relative guilt or innocence of individual members and no opportunity for any of them to be spared" (68). He reads this definition of genocide into my description of "genocide" carried out by ancient Israel, thereby making the question of theodicy more difficult than it really is.

But I simply use *genocide* in the normal sense of the word: "the systematic killing or extermination of a whole people or nation" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*). The "-cide" ending in "genocide" simply refers to killing (compare "insecticide"), without regard for the relative guilt or innocence of those who are killed.

2. Larson's definition of "genocide" leads him to artificially and inaccurately distance what God did through the ancient Israelites from largely analogous events, such as Noah's flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the ultimate extermination of the wicked. As evidence that the latter occurrences do not count as genocide, he cites the fact that God saved Noah and Lot and their families and delays the ultimate extermination of the wicked.

If Larson were right, the divine-Israelite destruction of Jericho would not involve genocide because Rahab was saved from that city, and none of the destruction inflicted on the Canaanites by the Israelites would count as genocide because God delayed it for hundreds of years until the iniquity of the inhabitants of Canaan (earlier called "Amorites")

was complete (Gen. 15:13–16).

3. Scriven writes: "Gane ends up, it is true, wishing people would embody the 'truer religion' that reflects Christ's sacrificial love, but he provides no argument, certainly no biblical argument, for privileging Jesus over genocide. His account of the Bible won't let him."

Give me a break, Chuck! Disagree if you like, but try to accurately represent what I say. You grossly distort my article, which shows that Israelite genocide was dependent on and limited to the Israelite theocracy, which no longer exists, and which cites biblical passages to the effect that we should leave vengeance to God and follow the Lord's command to love others as ourselves. If you don't get the clear message that I privilege Jesus over genocide, read my article again.

I should also point out that this article deals with a narrow, difficult topic in the context of my *NIV Application Commentary on Leviticus, Numbers*. For a full exposition of my understanding of the gospel and God's character in these biblical books, read the rest of this volume (806 pp. + indices).

SOURCE OF DISAGREEMENT

In his introduction, Larson clearly lays out the issue: "The question before us is whether we can think of God ordering ancient Israel to act so ruthlessly (Num. 21:1–35, 31:1–54; Deut. 2:1–37, 3:1–29, and 20:1–20). He answers Yes and I say No" (66). Later Larson explains: "The prac-

tice of genocide is not compatible with the character of God as embodied in Jesus Christ. . . . As it is with slavery and some other issues, our position should be that our religious ancestors honestly believed that God commanded them to practice genocide but that now we see this differently" (68).

Really?! Larson knows biblical passages clearly stating that the Lord (including through Moses) commanded the Israelites to wipe out groups of wicked people inhabiting the Promised Land. Nevertheless, he simply does not believe that aspect of this part of the Bible because it does not accord with his view of what the character of God/Christ allows the deity to do. C. S. Lewis would say that he is trying to tame Aslan.

Larson's view is based on selective reading of another part of the Bible to arrive at a conclusion that he then imposes on the rest of Scripture. Rather than take 2 Tim. 3:16 ("All Scripture is inspired by God. . .") seriously to mean that the whole Bible is the Source of our knowledge of God and his character, Larson makes the biblical Source conform to his own thinking. This is called "circular reasoning," and apart from any question of faith, use of this kind of reasoning logically invalidates conclusions derived through it.

In the process of selective reading and circular reasoning that privileges part of the Bible as opposed to other parts deemed "primitive," an approach that pervades critical so-called "exegesis," Larson disregards Christ's statements regarding divine retribution and Mosaic authority. Davidson could have used this in his article as an example of imposing human reason on the Word of God.

Because I have a solid biblical canon rather than a loose canon, refusing to rewrite part of the Bible in order to deny its explicit statements that back in

history God commanded something that I do not feel comfortable with, Scriven negatively characterizes my approach (and Davidson's) of scriptural authority as "flat-line": "It's not just the Bible as a whole that defines Christian life, it's all the bits and pieces. Every book and text has equal sway."

I reply: Did Christ or the apostles say that one part of the Bible is more important than another? If not, should we engage in this exercise, or would that be arrogant, or even blasphemous? I'm not interested in condemning anyone here. But I do wish to say: Wake up and see what you are doing!

Taking all of Scripture seriously as contributing to our understanding of God and his will for us by no means mandates knee-jerk, unthinking obedience to the letter of the law, which would call for reinstating practices such as levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5–10). Gulp. Rather, 2 Tim. 2:15 says: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (NAS95).

This calls for careful exegesis that takes into account factors such as diverse genres and, within the genre of law, the difference between culturally-conditioned applications of law and the timeless principles underlying them (see in detail in my *Leviticus, Numbers*, 305–14). Yes, the "bits and pieces" matter in a variety of ways, and we have no right to sweep away their timeless elements, including factors regarded today as politically incorrect (for instance, in *Leviticus* God condemns the practice of homosexuality as a moral evil; see *Leviticus, Numbers*, 325–30).

Obviously we have only touched on a few complex matters that branch out in all directions. We have not even begun to dialogue regarding individual

versus corporate responsibility, or another category that David Daube (*Studies in Biblical Law*) calls "ruler-punishment." Nevertheless, our discussion thus far suffices to amply demonstrate Davidson's point: The source of disagreement boils down to two different views of the Bible and its authority.

A Dilemma in Christian Ethics

BY DAVID R. LARSON

September 21, 2006

THANK YOU, everybody!

Guess what? My views are closer to those of Charles Scriven and Sigve Tonstad than they are to those of Roy Gane and Richard Davidson!

I do not clearly understand Roy Gane's clarification of the meaning of "genocide," however. It seems to me that he and I and the dictionary he cites may agree that it refers to the annihilation of entire groups of people without discriminating among them in any way.

Richard Davidson reports that his experiences color his views. My experiences color mine too.

When I was an earliteen in Northern California, my mother gathered me and my younger brother and sister to share some horrible news. The preceding weekend his mother had killed one of our young friends by using a hose to deliver automobile exhaust from the garage to the bedroom where he was sleeping.

She believed that God had told her to do this because, now that he had given his life completely to God, it would be better for him to die than to run the risk of backsliding.

Given this experience, perhaps it is not surprising that I am allergic to divine command theories of ethics whenever they claim that such imperatives can tell people in the past or present to do

**God
condemned
and
punished the
Innocent One
so the
guilty could
go free.**

—Beatrice Neall

things that are contrary to the character of God as revealed by Jesus Christ.

Here we encounter a dilemma in Christian ethics. On the one hand, if we do not test what we take to be the commands of God by other standards, we may make terrible mistakes. On the other hand, if we assess the commands of God by other criteria, we may make these norms more ultimate than God.

We slip through the horns of this dilemma, I believe, when we test everything that strikes us as divine commands, past and present, by what we learn from Jesus Christ. This gives us a standard other than the divine command itself which is not alien to God's own character.

Many Christian atrocities have been committed by those who believed that their situations were so unusual that "just this once" God's normal expectations did not apply. This way of making Christian ethical decisions strikes me as very dangerous.

Thankfully, we all agree that today genocide is never an option for Christians. Never!

Editor's Note: On September 6, 2006, reader and retired theology professor Beatrice Neall also contacted us via e-mail about the Gane-Larson exchange.

God in the Mud

BY BEATRICE NEALL

MANY TIMES AS WE study the Bible we don't like the picture of God we see. He seems harsh,

vindictive, severe. What we don't realize is that God, in dealing with sinners, not only got his hands dirty, he also sank into mud up to his armpits. To rescue us from the mire of sin he had to plunge into the mess himself, act in ways he didn't like, and muddy his reputation.

In dealing with sin, God has had to choose from bad options. He always tries prevention, but we humans don't listen to his warnings. Initially, he tried to prevent evil by issuing a stern prohibition. At Sinai, he evoked sheer terror through blinding light, mushroom cloud, thunder, earthquake, and trumpet blast.

In the covenant blessings and cursings, God appealed to the lowest level of human motivation, reward and punishment. He enacted harsh laws with severe consequences for violation. But threats don't work unless they are carried out.

God at times used extermination—"ethnic cleansing"—an extreme method. Israel was commanded to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan, not leaving alive "anything that breathes" (Deut. 20:16), putting to death "men and women, children and infants" (1 Sam. 15:3). Why? Israel was confronted with vile heathen cultures. The Lord feared Israel would absorb these evil practices—and they did.

God has tried patience. He has waited thousands of years before executing final judgment

on this world. However, sinners take advantage of his patience.

What has God done to help us understand him better, to see through his anger to the heart of love beneath? Is there anything he has done to wash the mud off his reputation?

He sent Jesus into this world. In Jesus, we see the heart of God opened wide. The greatest atrocity ever committed in the history of this world was the execution of the most innocent man who ever lived. God condemned and punished the Innocent One so the guilty could go free. Yet by this double injustice God saves our race.

The cross is an amazing revelation about how God relates to his creatures, both good and evil. The cross shows that sin is deadly—so deadly that it takes extreme measures to remedy it. The cross shows that God has not left us alone to suffer the results of sin. The cross reveals to our dull senses the pain that sin has brought to the heart of God. The cross shows the vile-ness of human nature.

At the cross, the heart of God was torn open by a Roman soldier. Bathing the very spear that pierced it, a torrent of blood and water gushed forth—blood to wash away guilt, water to impart new life from above. From the cross flows a river of love to a skeptical world.

That river washes the mud off our understanding of God. ■