



Is Christ Captive to Bibliolatry? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Can a theory of biblical authority undermine the Lordship of Christ? The question weighs on me, and seems especially pertinent now, with the focus on Scripture in the current Sabbath School Quarterly.

I've been conversing—in print, online, and by telephone—with Richard Davidson and Roy Gane, both of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and both widely respected, on the question of how to read the Bible. Both of them understand the Bible, as a whole and in all its parts, to be, as Professor Davidson has written, the “utterly reliable word of God.”¹

In an e-mail message, Davidson suggested that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount makes no advance on the moral standard, familiar from the Pentateuch, of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.² Although Jesus appears to contrast his own vision with that of the so-called *lex talionis*, the Sermon, Davidson said, does not call us “to a higher ethical standard. The same call for *personal* love for one's enemies Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount” can be found “throughout” the Old Testament.³

Davidson wants the Bible's authority to be flat across all its bits and pieces, so he has to show that Jesus does not disagree with what you find elsewhere in the book. And it is true, certainly, that the Old Testament expresses the ideals of love for the stranger and reconciliation with the enemy. It is also true that Jesus himself was a lover of the Hebrew Bible. But the suggestion that the Old Testament gives voice “throughout” to the ideal of enemy love is, to say the least, debatable.

To take the severest counterexample, you

can find in Scripture calls to . . . *genocide*, calls as unmitigated as they are horrific.⁴ This fact is one reason why the most influential scholars agree that Jesus' reading of the Old Testament takes Jewish moral thought in a distinctive direction. Even if some disagree, the consensus on this is as wide as the sea.

Davidson and Gane both resist granting authority, over Scripture, to fashionable human reason. But when they deny, or seem to deny, that some parts of Scripture have more authority for Christian life than other parts, they take issue, I think, with Jesus himself. Despite what Holy Writ clearly contains, Jesus never called anyone to genocide, nor, for that matter, did he promise happiness to those who dash their enemies' “little ones . . . against the rock.”⁵ Instead, building on the ever-widening embrace of Hebrew prophecy, he called us to love of enemy, and embodied that call, on the cross, by asking God to forgive his own executioners (Matt. 5:38–48; Luke 23:34). What is more, he championed this vision while living under Roman brutes who flexed their muscle by dotting the roadside with crosses and the crucified who hung on them.⁶

Shocked into new perspective by the Resurrection, the New Testament writers said that this Jesus is alone the “exact imprint” of the divine being, alone the true light, the Word made flesh, the revealer of the Father's heart.⁷ They knew the Bible's variety of vision, and knew its potential to be confusing; henceforth Jesus would be, to Christians, the basis for the Bible's fundamental unity.

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priate for everything in the world except the Scriptures."⁸ But saying this is just the problem. Criticism is appropriate for everything in the world except... God! What Davidson says of a document that by its own account is *not* God (Isa. 55:8, 9) comes perilously close to bibliolatry.

I always wonder why this is so hard to see. In the Bible's own testimony, Jesus is the Word of God—the final criterion of Christian truth, the canon, as you might say, within the canon. And you do not bow to fashionable human reason when you say this; you acknowledge what the Bible itself declares.

In April 1933, leaders of the German ecclesiastical establishment released "guiding principles" that put God's sanction behind the Nazi obsession with "race, folk and nation." They said that Germany must protect itself "against the unfit and inferior."

They anathematized Jews as "alien blood" in the "body politic." And in defense of all this, they said that "Holy Scripture is... able to speak about a holy wrath and a refusal of love."

The few German Christians who were then resisting Hitler met in Barmen in 1934 to express both their dismay

and their conviction. The statement they jointly issued said: "Jesus, as he is testified to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we are to hear, which we are to trust and obey in life and in death."

They were calling German Christians to test the church's words—the church's life—by this one Word of God, and to accept only what was consistent with that Word.⁹ The call went largely unheeded. But it was true then, and is still true.

Or so it seems to me. And that is why the question I began with won't go easily away. ■

Notes and References

1. The quote is from his "Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures," a relatively recent document available at <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/interp%20scripture%20davidson.pdf>; accessed April 9, 2007.

2. See Exod. 21:23, 24; Lev. 24:19, 20; Deut. 19:21. Jesus refers to these passages in Matt. 5:38ff.

3. Points made by e-mail communication, dated Mar. 21, 2007.

4. Roy Gane noted this theme in his "Israelite Genocide and Islamic Jihad," *Spectrum* 34.4 (fall 2006):61–65.

5. This from the heartbreaking, if revengeful, Ps. 137, one of the so-called Imprecatory Psalms.

6. I rely on James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001): 83.

7. See Heb. 1:1–3; the other phrases allude to John 1, and numerous New Testament passages make the same point.

8. "The Authority of Scripture: A Personal Pilgrimage," *Spectrum* 34.3 (summer 2006):42. This essay first appeared in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 1.1 (1990):39–56.

9. The 1933 statement of the "Evangelical Church of the German Nation" may be found in Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 222, 223. The Barmen Declaration is accessible on the Internet and is quoted in numerous works of church history.

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