Miracles, Bondage, and Irrelevance

Christ and Bibliolatry

CHARLES SCRIVEN AND David Larson cite Bible texts in support of the so-called "Christ-centered" approach to biblical authority (Matt. 28:18; John 1:1,14; Col. 1:15–19; Heb. 1:1–4) (summer 2006, 68; winter 2007, 8), what Scriven calls the "ascending line" theory versus the "flat-line" theory, which sees all Scripture as equally authoritative (fall 2006, 6). But no straightforward reading of these verses could possibly lead one to conclude that God's revelation in Christ contradicts his revelation elsewhere in Scripture. Indeed, the New Testament depicts Christ as the Guide of Israel during their wilderness wanderings (1 Cor. 10:4, 9). God declared through the prophet Malachi, "I am the Lord; I change not" (Mal. 3:6). Jesus stated, "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30).

Whether one wishes to ask, in Scriven's words, whether Christ is captive to "Bibliolatry"—that strange word so often used to subvert the Bible's supreme authority—it is clear in Scripture that Christ in his earthly ministry was captive to the Bible. Why else, when confronting Satan in the wilderness, would he have relied on the written Word for his defense (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10)? This would hardly make sense if Christ possessed greater authority than the Old Testament Scriptures. Why, indeed, would the Son of the eternal God need to fall back on tattered, flawed representations of the divine character in his struggle with the adversary?

Gane and Neall have done a masterful job marshalling evidence in support of biblical revelation on the subject of Israel and genocide (summer 2006, 61-65; fall 2006, 7–10; spring 2007, 5–6), as well as in contrasting what Israel did with the Crusaders and jihadists of later times (summer 2006, 62–64; fall 2006, 8). But one point, alluded to by Gane, deserves closer attention. Gane speaks of the "resident, manifest Presence of the divine King" in the midst of Israel (summer 2006, 64). According to the Bible narrative, the supernatural evidence that God was with Israel was as visible to the surrounding cultures as it was to God's people (see Exod. 7–14; Josh. 2:9–11; 5:1). We aren't talking here about sightings of the Virgin Mary in some pilgrim town, visible only to believers. The miracles that attended Israel were seen by all who were anywhere near. By contrast, no rivers or oceans parted before Richard Lion Heart, no pillar of cloud goes before Osama bin Laden, and certainly no Urim and Thummim guide George W. Bush!

Larson correctly warns that such manifestations fail to prove divine endorsement (summer 2006, 67–68). The Bible is clear that demonic powers can work miracles (Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 16:14), and Ellen White likewise warns that miracles are not a test of God's favor (*Selected Messages*, 2:48–55). But signs and wonders such as those attending ancient Israel do demonstrate transcendent intervention, divine or satanic, superseding the normal play of ideas and the natural course of events. In view of such signs attending Israel, and similar ones in heathen culture (Exod. 7:11, 22; 8:7), any outside observer—whether Pharaoh in Egypt or Rahab in Jericho—would be compelled to consider other factors in determining which power to honor and serve.

The record of God's dealings with his followers and the world would have to be compared with the record left by other gods, cultures, and peoples. With miracles found on both sides, obviously such demonstrations couldn't rightly decide one's ultimate choice. But they would clearly give evidence that something higher and greater than ordinary, natural causes was at work.

Let us also bear in mind that, unlike human beings, when God orders the death of anyone, he does so knowing their hearts, motives, and future choices. The Bible declares of

God, "Thou, even Thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men" (1 Kings 8:39). Understanding this, we can see how mortals cannot rightly undertake such actions as those in question unless unmistakably guided by the divine hand.

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Charles Scriven Responds:

PAULSON'S POSITION is clear: "God's revelation in Christ" nowhere "contradicts" what Scripture elsewhere commends.

Equally clear, however, is that Paulson cannot *follow* a story. The Bible represents God as commanding genocide—mass killing of whole peoples, including babies. But the story *moves forward*, through Isaiah and others, to Jesus. Jesus, facing a murderous empire, asks us to love our enemies. Then he walks the talk by asking God to forgive his own executioners.

It is just here, *in the story*, that the Bible's picture of God comes, for the first and only time, into perfect focus. That, remember, is what the resurrection *means*.

Paulson covers his eyes. He doesn't see how the story develops, or even, in the letter, acknowledge Christ's nonviolence.

Had Paulson actually followed the story, he would see that it demolishes his theory of the Bible. He ends up, instead, with a God (and presumably a Christ) who orders human beings to murder other human beings.

This is catastrophic. But not for the vengeful, and not for tyrants.

Sabbath Justice

IN "Sabbath Justice," by Kendra Haloviak (spring 2007), I truly enjoyed the author's point of view that Sabbath is about healing and release from bondage.

But I am afraid we forgot that bondage is bigger that women's ordination. Bondage is the way we live and close out those people less fortunate than us from living in our communities. Bondage is also the way we refuse to allow young adults to participate in meaningful ways in church leadership.

I hope this article awakens in many Adventists the desire to act boldly about equality on Sabbath and every day of the week.

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Seeking a Sanctuary

I MUCH ENJOYED Herbert F. Douglass's review of the second edition of Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart's *Seeking a Sanctuary* (spring 2007). To his comments I would like to add a few other observations about this remarkable book.

First, I doubt if we as Adventists sufficiently appreciate the accomplishment this work represents. I'm not a specialist in American religious history, but I do have more than a passing familiarity with the literature. Despite the considerable scholarly attention paid the religious tradition of the United States (and to the Mormons in particular), I doubt whether there is another work out there that combines the historical/sociological sophistication and literary elegance that *Seeking a Sanctuary* does. We are honored that Bull and Lockhart chose us.

That said, someone owning their first edition (which appeared in 1989) might wonder if the second offers significant differences. Yes. It is, first, almost one hundred pages longer and includes a number of well-chosen illustrations (the first had none). By themselves, the eighty-eight pages of endnotes make the study worthwhile as a guide to Adventist literature. Some topics have been refashioned. The chapter on "Blacks," has become "Race," reflecting the ethnic plurality that so much defines our contemporary church.

Of course, the seventeen years between the two editions witnessed notable developments in American Adventism, which in itself justified updating. In 1989, for example, few Adventists paid attention to the Davidians, nor did the original edition give them any mention. This changed after events at Mount Carmel in 1994. In response, *Seeking a Sanctuary* has a completely new chapter, "The Ethics of Schism," which sketches breakaway groups going back to the 1860s and includes a thorough account of the Davidian offshoot and ultimate shootout.

My professional field is American cultural history, an endeavor that seeks to find unities among the endless varieties of our cultural life. That background gives me particular admiration for the authors' grasp of the American church (and they're English!). *Seeking a Sanctuary* is chockablock with insights, all of them suggestive and most persuasive. They observe that Adventism is a peculiarly feminine religious denomination, for example. This claim is only partially based on the unusually high percentage of women in our church and the fact that we are by far the largest church in America founded by a woman (George Knight might contest that Ellen White is our "founder").

More to the point, our response to the dominant—and as we view it,

often hostile American society—has shaped our feminine quality. In good Victorian fashion, just as women responded to their social limitations by staking out their own delimited sphere, so the Adventist Church has created its own subculture (this process being a major theme of the book), one that does not contest the political sphere of the nation.

"At no stage have they [Adventists] attempted to confront the state," write Bull and Lockhart. "They have, rather, remained quiet and malleable, not seeking to draw attention to themselves, lest this provoke a hostile reaction" (259). One might argue that our church's readiness to engage in court litigation when religious liberty issues arise represents a bow to masculine values. That notwithstanding, the authors' point carries general persuasiveness.

The most commonly cited observation of the book—indeed, the work's conclusion—is the contention that Adventism is a revolving door, bringing in relatively low-status converts, elevating them and their children into the educated middle class, only to see the grandchildren frequently leave the Church, having been fully assimilated into American life and now finding Adventism an irrelevance or inconvenience. This disturbing contention seems as intuitively true now as it did in the late 1980s.

The ambitious sweep of Bull and Lockhart's work brings inevitable errors of fact. Southern Missionary College, for example, voted to admit black students in 1965 not 1968. But given the indefatigable research the book represents, it seems petty to scout for such moments. More interesting to debate are the intriguing arguments they advance. Their discussions of the endemic conflict between physician and pastor for the soul of Adventism and of the impact of the Adventist medical establishment on contemporary Adventism are fascinating. Has, in fact, a medical template (in the theological dress of holism) essentially superseded Adventism's traditional theological one? Worth discussing.

Likewise, their penultimate chapter dealing with the self-supporting movement offers wonderful reflections on those traditionalists who have sought to realize the Adventist vision outside church polity walls. For all the tension and internecine battles that have occurred between institutions such as Hartland and church leadership, the self-supporting movement (in the manner of the monastics or of Ignatius Loyola within Catholicism) nevertheless represents a healthy trend within American Adventism, suggesting that reform and reinvigoration still exist.

Bull and Lockhart don't miss much, but one recent development seems to fly under their radar. This is the revival of "last generation" theology, which stresses the Adventist chestnut that a final generation on earth will replicate God's character and usher in the Second Coming. Nor do they mention the thriving General Youth Conference, which since the early 2000s has helped reinvigorate a form of traditional Adventism in hundreds of young people in North America. Yet if unacknowledged by name, the emergence of the General Youth Conference supports another point of the authors, namely, that this sort of restorationist movement reveals the resilience of traditional Adventist theology through the decades.

I always felt that the original edition of *Seeking a Sanctuary*, despite its enthusiastic critical reception, never had the exposure and broad impact on the Church it deserved. Perhaps this was due to its timing, appearing when the Church was still exhausted from the theological battles of the early 1980s and rather disinterested in self-analysis. We can hope that the current moment is more propitious for a careful study of their work.

This is important not because Bull and Lockhart offer prescriptions for a clearer theology or more vigorous church growth (theirs being purely a work of analysis). The great value here lies in encouraging us to reflect on their central argument: that we have been willing—indeed anxious—to live unobtrusively apart from mainstream society, asking little of and receiving little from America.

Are we content with this? Or with a church demographic characterized by an aging Anglophone population and requiring a steady flow of converts to maintain numbers? Might there be another path, one that depends on social engagement of a more ambitious type and that speaks to people's need for spiritual nurturance in more encompassing ways?

Such a departure would test the very core of our institutional culture. But to fail to seek new departures would be to consign Adventism to increasing irrelevance in American life.

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Ellen White and the Bible

I HAVE JUST READ the interview with Graeme Bradford regarding the work and writings of Ellen White. I find it disturbing that someone who claims to support the work and writings of Ellen White would instead subtly attempt to undermine confidence in the same.

Bradford insinuates that her writings are no longer relevant to young people because of her style of writing and the words and language that she uses. Quoting from his response to Bonnie Dwyer—"I think most of the young people today are going to find their spiritual help from more contemporary authors. We are not going to change that since contemporary authors deal more with the real world the young people live in."

In a single stroke, Bradford has eliminated, in addition to the writings of Ellen White, entire sections of the Bible because they were written in an entirely different age and setting using language sometimes very difficult to understand regardless of the version that you read.

Where now are our young people and even our more mature members to turn for counsel? If counsel from these older sources is no longer comprehensible, then what contemporary sources would you suggest?

ALLEN FOWLER
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The Branch Dividians

I APPRECIATE David Larson's review of Kenneth Newport's *The Branch Davidians of Waco* (spring 2007). Yes, Newport's thesis places undue emphasis on Koresh's beliefs, and I like Larson's suggestions for other keys to understanding (Koresh's psychological wounds and "intense drives for sex and power").

I'd like to add another that applies to the whole community: emotional conditioning. Though few Seventh-day Adventists joined him, Koresh was only successful recruiting among people who already were equipped with the same web of feelings—that is to say, feelings of anticipatory victimhood, of being right (though the heavens fall), and of innocence performing before a cosmic audience.

As Kindergarten Sabbath School leader and lower divisions coordinator in my church, I think a lot about how we transmit religious feelings—ones that would lead to "doing the right things." I would hope we can train children (and adults) in assurance—not that "I'm right" or "we have the truth," but that "Jesus is taking good care of me right now, so I can care about you"—or, in the time of trouble, "Jesus is taking good care of me, so I won't shoot back."

I congratulate the Children's Ministries Department for addressing this need for emotional education through its new Sabbath School curriculum, GraceLink.

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Building Community Life

I ENJOYED YOUR editorial "Out of Africa." As we build a world communion of faith, the fostering of media productions from all corners of our faith community will be needed: books, blogs, radio, television, film, Internet, and media arts and crafts yet to be discovered.

We need, I think, to build into our community life music and storytelling from all nooks and crannies of the rich cultural fabric of our world, focused on the love of God. Such stories, music, and images incorporated into our spiritual culture, I don't believe, need be unique to the "Christian" community, but should also come from those "Jewish" and "Islamic" communities so precious to the humane experience, as well as from diverse ethnic "converts."

For myself, with *Spectrum*, I want to see more of a global emphasis. I want to see less nitpicking on theological nuances and more on the simple Grace, the Peace, the Love, that is our Calling, our Vocation. The validity of Ellen White as a prophet, for me is not worth arguing about. It's sort of like the Trinity—a discussion almost always leads nowhere except to help harden opinions, which are not verifiable except by using *artificial intelligence*, it seems. I want to see thoughtful articles about what's going on in our movement—our conversation—to foster the God Jesus worshipped as Messiah (See Deut. 6).

Also, when it comes to media and the world church, I am pleased to see *Spectrum*'s movement into digital media, an excellent strategic move. One day, a paper edition of the magazine may be a waste of paper and postage. ■

JIM BECRAFT
via the Internet