

# The Promise of Peace | A REVIEW BY MATTHEW BURDETTE



**Charles Scriven, below, discusses his vision for the future of Adventism in his latest book, above.**



Charles Scriven has offered his vision for what it means to be an Adventist, and I am feeling rather uncertain about it. In the opening chapter of his book, *The Promise of Peace*,<sup>1</sup> Scriven acknowledges that the place from which he writes is not a neutral one but that his writing reflects his life story. I will take this a step further by acknowledging that the reader, too, comes into conversation with a book not from a neutral place but from their own identity and experiences that are informed by ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, faith and skepticism, etc.

I acknowledge this about the reader because I must acknowledge that my uncertainty about Scriven's vision for Adventism may well have more to do with my identity and experiences as an Adventist than it does with what Scriven says Adventism is all about. And I suspect that I won't be the only one to feel this way.

That being said, let me make perfectly clear that I liked this book. It is because I liked it so much that I am uncertain about it. I will explain.

Somewhat reminiscent of Jürgen Moltmann's theology of the cross, Scriven puts forward hope, and specifically the hope for God's peace for our whole world, as "the foundation and criticism"<sup>2</sup> of Adventist Christianity. Indeed, his case for a tradition as specific as Adventism is grounded in his belief that this hope for God's peace is the heart of Christian faith itself. Adventism is an eschatological community and is rooted in and motivated by this hope in between the experience of "disappointments and dreams." Again, this is somewhat reminiscent of Moltmann.<sup>3</sup>

Scriven frequently cites Adventist history and its significant figures throughout the book but nevertheless dedicates a chapter to outlining that history. It is this chapter that encapsulates the greatest weakness of Scriven's book: it is a progressive interpretation of Adventist history and, consequently, Adventist identity. For example, Scriven does not mention that the Adventist church believed and still believes that Ellen White had the spiritual gift of prophecy but instead describes her as "the visionary whose prophetic leadership would steer the church for decades" (25) and "the most influential of the Adventist pioneers" (28). Statements like these suggest that Scriven's target audience is those who are outside of the Adventist tradition; however, the book is quite relevant to those within the tradition. One can easily (and justifiably) interpret his loose reading of Adventist history as dishonest, but one can just as easily see that Scriven is challenging the dominant interpretation of that history and suggesting a different direction that is nevertheless faithful to the tradition. So, perhaps this weakness is actually a strength. Scriven has made himself into what he describes Adventism as—"the dissenting faithful" (28).

And this brings me to the next major thrust of the book: Adventist identity as "the dissenting faithful," the "peacemaking remnant." More than a few times, Scriven reminds the reader that Adventists have chosen not to have a binding doctrinal creed but have instead committed themselves to being open to the leading of God's

Spirit—Adventists are both “being” and “becoming.” In light of current debates happening in Adventism, Scriven could have written the whole book on this theme. The sections in which Scriven discusses Adventist identity as “being” and “becoming” are some of the more hope-inspiring sections. He writes, for example, “The pledge we make when we embrace the Adventist way might now be this: *Thanks to the gift of grace, and for the purpose of blessing to all, we join together in keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*” (54). He sees this as a disclosure of the “heart of Adventism.”

That “heart of Adventism” finds its expression in the way of dissent and the way of peace. Scriven understands Adventism as a Radical Reformation movement whose loyalty lies with Christ and none other and whose loyalty is a radical, transcendent loyalty. It is this loyalty to Jesus that makes “the Adventist way” the “practice of hope” (47); and that practice of hope is the practice of dissent. Scriven sees the practice of Sabbath as the practice of hope and dissent in the Adventist community—looking forward to a restored world of peace in which all, like Israel, have been liberated from slavery. It is no coincidence, then, that Scriven makes much of the fact that Adventists were so opposed to slavery in the United States during the civil war: “The Sabbath was their embrace of the church’s Jewish roots, despite prejudice against Jews that had hardened under Constantine. Opposition to slavery was their refusal, despite Constantine’s vision of church-state solidarity, to equate loyalty to Caesar with loyalty to Christ” (59).

In dissent, Scriven writes that Adventists remained committed to peace and nonviolence. To Scriven, this is one of the most important aspects of Adventist mission in the world. While he does not use the language of “realized” or “collaborative” eschatology, that is exactly what Scriven is talking about: “True Christian hope is never passive, as if you were at some grimy bus stop where nothing happens and all you can do is wait for a ride to somewhere else. Hope is active, always looking to make an impact” (79).

One of the low points of the book was Scriven’s Christology, which I found rather deficient. The strongest Christological statement that Scriven makes is this: “So here was Someone like you and me—who, by the Father’s grace was so fully responsive to divine leading that He was the *human form of who God is*. In Him you could see the *identity of God*” (106). I shudder to think of the implications of Jesus’ divine nature being wrapped up in his responsiveness to divine leading. I understand that Scriven wants to be attentive to

those readers who are nonbelievers, but I remain unconvinced that downplaying the divinity of Jesus makes his case any stronger—quite the opposite, in my opinion.

The last section I will discuss is Scriven’s comments on the church. His first sentence in this section was my favorite: “The church is the beloved community, and the beloved community is... a mess” (111). From there, Scriven went on to talk about the problems in the Christian church from the New Testament, using the Corinthian Christians as an example. I fear that in this discussion Scriven almost makes the mistake that Barth once wrote about—speaking about the church in abstract terms of ideals instead of the reality of the living church as it is today.<sup>4</sup> What Scriven says about the church is inspiring; and it is indeed a vision for which the church should strive. But the reality of the situation...

This brings me back to my original statement: I am uncertain about the vision that Scriven outlines in this book not because I disagree with it, but because I fear that it is just that—a vision. I fully intend to give this book to people—whether they are Adventists or not. Those people who are Adventists and are familiar with the Adventist community may, like me, wish that mainstream Adventist theology, ethics, and mission were as Scriven described. And those who are not Adventists and are unfamiliar with the community may well be drawn to Adventism after reading this book; but I fear that it will not take them very long to stumble across an angry, fundamentalist blog or cantankerous church member who will not hesitate to define Adventism in narrow, exclusive, hopeless terms. In spite of this, I am better for having read Scriven’s book; and I certainly recommend it. ■

## Notes and References

1. Charles Scriven, *The Promise of Peace* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2009).
2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
3. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
4. Karl Barth, “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” in *God Here and Now*, trans. Paul M. van Buren, 75–104 (London: Routledge, 2003).

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