



## The First Adventist? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

If Jeremiah was the first Jew, was Roy Branson the first Adventist? The question bears on the pathology—and promise—of Adventism. The pathology was on display this past summer in San Antonio, and the promise was on display—imperfectly, of course—in Roy Branson, not to mention the Adventist pioneers he admired.

One of the greatest of the prophets, Jeremiah, became, as one historian remarked, the “first Jew”—Jew, that is, in the sense familiar today: a person of Hebrew background living in the diaspora, away from the homeland. Jeremiah not only spent some of his life outside the Promised Land, but also reflected on how Israelites who had been dragged away to Babylon could be faithful there. He sent a letter (Jeremiah 29) encouraging them to build houses, bear children and—this is astounding—“seek the welfare of the city” where they reside.

Even when you’re away from home against your will, Jeremiah was saying, go about the business God gave you: take care of your families; take care of the wider world. Seek the *shalom*, the peace—the “welfare”—of those around you. Don’t follow Babylonian “dreams,” but do follow God’s. Live generously, even when you are aliens.

There were hints of Adventist generosity at the 2015 General Conference session in San Antonio, but too little of it came through in the preaching. For the most part, speakers picked by top administrators made an argument for *other* worldliness. We are aliens here, they said, and our job is to get ready to leave, and to bring others along with us.

Escape from the here and now? Jeremiah wouldn’t get it. He would have loved, I think, Jesus’ saying that the faithful live in the world but do not “belong” to it. Those words seem like an echo of his own, and they precisely entail investment in the well-being of the *earth*. Right in the middle of his apocalyptic sermon at the end of Matthew, Jesus himself, after all, made this very point. Fear cannot box the faithful servant into some sort of skit-

tish, unimaginative status quo; if you are faithful, you *improve upon* things (Matthew 25:14–30).

The familiar phrase, “in the world but not of it,” does not mean “in the world, alas.” The world is God’s gift, and you must dare to dream about its prospects—galvanized all the while by the hope of ultimate victory the Second Coming will fulfil. And if preoccupation with *escape* is a travesty, so, mark this well, is preoccupation with *words*. Words matter but they serve the higher purpose of peace, the welfare of the city where you live.

Roy Branson got this. If he was not the first Adventist, he was, perhaps, the first theologian to insist that a people of the Second Coming—a people who feel to some degree like outsiders in this present age—must also be a people of peace, a people who seek the welfare of the city where they live. In the twentieth century, black Adventist pastors such as Lewis Sheafe, Matthew Strachan and Warren Banfield became influential in the American civil rights movement. But Branson was certainly a pioneering theologian; his unwavering passion was how the church can meet the world’s needs, reform its politics, bend its arc toward justice, even joy.

One of the last pieces he completed for publication was a review of *Do Justice*, a book of essays, edited by two Australian Adventists, that defines faithful living along such lines as Jeremiah suggested. The book pleased him; it felt, I think, like a vindication of his life work.

It might well have pleased some of the Adventist pioneers Roy admired for their sometime dalliances with—even movement *toward*—a vision like Jeremiah’s. Today our topmost leaders resist all of this, or at least (judging from San Antonio) pay it no regard. Still, the vision remains alive, even if Roy does not, and that, surely, is something to celebrate. ■

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