



Why Does Jesus Christ Give Offense? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

As the 2015 General Conference session was about to end, a delegate moved that during the next five years, church leaders oversee official discussion of the theory of biblical interpretation (“hermeneutics”). The motion passed. One question now is whether this initiative will prop up the scriptural reading strategy that undergirds the church’s policy, reinforced at the same GC session, of female subordination to men.

That was in the background when religion teachers belonging to the Adventist Society for Religious Studies (ASRS) turned their attention, at the organization’s annual meeting in November, to the question of hermeneutics. ASRS officers, hoping members would express themselves early, proposed adoption of a statement entitled “The Centrality of Christ for the Interpretation of Scripture.” It was meant as a *biblical* approach to resolving questions (concerning women, or violence, or whatever) that arise when biblical passages seem to conflict. Their draft statement noted how “selective” mining of inspired texts may lead to dangerous conclusions (as it did when Bible-quoting pastors defended slavery in the American South), and argued that “internal evidence” from the Bible makes “the risen Christ the ultimate criterion for interpretation.”

When the statement met with objections, a small taskforce was asked to revise it. The next morning the taskforce came back with a substitute statement that had...edited Jesus out. The thesis in the officers’ draft title, “The Centrality of Christ for the Interpretation of Scripture,” had been eliminated. As the Bible’s decisive voice, as a methodological principle for interpreting scripture, the man God had made “both Lord and Messiah” was...gone.

The taskforce’s substitute statement is printed along with these remarks. Reading it, you may scratch your head as you recall how adamant the New Testament is about the centrality of Christ. He is the “image” of the divine, in whom God’s “fullness” was “pleased to dwell.” He is, in a *singular* and *ultimate*

sense, God’s human face, the Word made “flesh,” the “exact imprint of God’s very being.” What is more, he is our goal; we are to reach for “the measure of the full stature of Christ,” to grow up, with others, “into him who is the head, into Christ.”¹

All this is said of no one else: not Moses, not Malachi, not anyone. Taking it seriously would simplify our journey toward hermeneutical unity, and yet the taskforce set it aside. We may be grateful, of course, that ASRS members referred the substitute statement back to the officers (where it now remains), but you still wonder how a Christ-less draft could have come to expression at all. Does this reflect some current of present Adventist thinking?

Notice that the substitute statement makes no straightforward reference to a key problem in biblical interpretation, which is, as Shakespeare put it, that “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.” You just *can* find proof texts that undergird violence and injustice; the Bible teaches, for instance, that you may “acquire” slaves from neighboring nations and then pass them on to your children as their “property.”² Did the taskforce want to sweep biblical reality out of view?

Notice, too, that the substitute’s first use of “plain reading” comes inside of quotation marks. This acknowledges that the phrase is borrowed, and recalls how some insiders use it to urge that Genesis 1 and 2 *not* be understood as involving metaphor. Did the taskforce want ASRS to pander to these insiders?

Whatever the taskforce thought, “plain reading” does not, in fact, resolve all problems. Applied to Leviticus 25 it would underwrite slavery; applied to Deuteronomy 21 it would (to take one further example) underwrite stoning of rebellious sons. Still, I hasten to add that the idea of scripture’s plain sense does have a place. If only trained scholars could get God’s point in the Bible, after all, then only scholars could be faithful, and how would we account, say, for Mother Teresa? Nevertheless, when real puzzles come to light we do need some form of supplementary discernment.

The draft statement of the ASRS officers said the decisive source of supplementary discernment is Christ. Faced with puzzles from an inspired and inspiring book,³ you weigh your options against standards suggested by the *whole* story, especially its culmination in Christ's story, Christ's teaching, Christ's resurrection. Yet as the incident in Atlanta shows, even among (some) Adventist scholars, this appears to give offense; the taskforce seemed, certainly, to pay it no attention.

One response to the incident, and a good one, could be that when you overlook diversity and development in the Bible, or feel ill-at-ease confessing Jesus as God's ultimate voice, you ignore and betray *the plain sense of Scripture*. Could some sources of discomfort with Christ go deeper than hermeneutical disagreement? Christian thinkers have long understood, after all, that Christ just does *give offense*. In 1930s Berlin, Bonhoeffer lectured on Christ as the "center", and it was offensive. Eighty years before, in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard extolled the "god-man," and it was offensive. And a long time before that, the New Testament pioneered the point, and it was offensive. Perhaps the Christ who challenges humanity—not only by offering forgiveness and generosity but also by *requiring* them—is still offensive. Still offensive to *us*.

So, one source of discomfort with the centrality of Christ for interpreting the Bible is likely our ambivalence about his deeply challenging presence and perspective. It is easier, after all, to read scripture for what we want to see than for what *he* wants us to see. One thing, in any case, seems sure: no one will bother to refute the main point I am making here. That won't happen because, *on the basis of scripture*, it can't be done. What you can do is set Jesus Christ aside. The incident in Atlanta shows how compelling a temptation that continues to be. ■

Adventist Society for Religious Studies' (Unvoted) Hermeneutics Draft

As our church community gives renewed study to how Scripture is read and interpreted in the church, the members of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies believe that it is important to participate in this process. ASRS affirms that an adequate hermeneutic asserts the full authority of Scripture in its plain and intended meaning. The "plain reading" of Scripture, however, is not to be confused with a selective or superficial reading of the text.

An adequate hermeneutic facilitates the sharing of the wonders of Scripture so God's Word can live anew in our worship, min-

istry and mission. It affirms the unity of Scripture even as it acknowledges the diversity within it. It affirms the full authority of Scripture as the inspired word of God, even as we admit that we always read the Bible as broken people who need the Spirit of God and each other's correction in order to read well.

The hermeneutic needed suggests that a true plain reading of Scripture is not a superficial reading. As scholars, we long to assist our church as it seeks to be ever more faithful to the Word.

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.

References

1. In order of appearance, the scriptural allusions are to: Acts 2:36, Colossians 1:15, John 1:14, Hebrews 1:3 and Ephesians 4:13, 15.
2. Leviticus 25:44–46.
3. 2 Timothy 3:16.



FEEDBACK

■ letters, e-mails, and comments

Letter to the Editor

I first met Roy Branson when we were students at Atlantic Union College (AUC) in 1955–57. I learned that he was the grandson of W. H. Branson, a former president of the General Conference, whom I had seen and heard as a boy in Barbados, West Indies.

When I was a senior medical student at the White Memorial Hospital, Dr. Bruce Branson, Roy's brother, an instructor in Surgery, was known as a martinet: rigid and cracking the whip. One morning as we were making rounds on the surgical ward, the door opened, and in walked Roy. Instead of greeting his brother, Roy enthusiastically greeted me, saying how happy he was to see me. Dr. Bruce quickly asked, "Do you know him?" Roy replied, "Sure, he used to keep us straight at AUC". From then there was a distinct change in Dr. Bruce.

[Before] Dr. Bruce went to Peru on sabbatical, he asked me to look after the house he was building in Loma Linda, and to see that his wife and son got their exams, tests and vaccines to get their passport visas to join him later.

All this because of his brother, Dr. Roy Branson
Requiescat in pace.

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