



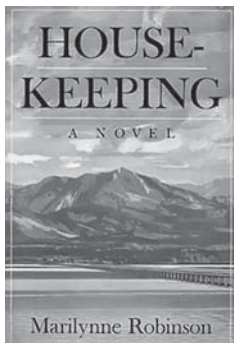
Are Our Teachers Fit to Teach? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

When a misfit who flirts with suicide joins herself with two orphan nieces, you sense again the wonder—and fragility—of families. Sylvie, who returns to her lakeside town from a life of transience and freight trains, begins to see that she matters. Although one niece never reconciles fully with her strange presence, and finally leaves, the other, Ruthie, sticks with Sylvie through all the disappointments and scary shadows that complicate their need for one another.

One day the townsfolk notice the two of them have returned from some excursion in a freight car. After that, the tall, fat sheriff comes around, and so do well-meaning ladies with casseroles and prying questions. The courts are about to ask whether Sylvie can keep Ruthie.

Sylvie tells the ladies that families “should stay together,” and also embarks upon a frenzy of housekeeping. At this, Ruthie, also alarmed, grasps a slender hope: perhaps her aunt’s “eagerness to save our household” will convince the authorities that it “should not be violated.”

All this is from *Housekeeping* by the Pulitzer-Prize-winning Marilynne Robinson. Because it’s set in North Idaho, where I have myself enjoyed the lakes and woods and huckleberries, I do not so much imagine as remember the milieu. But bigger reasons for loving the book are the author’s lyricism, her attunement to



human feeling, the Christian passion that drives and shapes her imagination. Not for a minute would I doubt her conviction that the church is itself a household, and that this household, too, should by no means “be violated.”

Work such as that of John McVay and John Brunt on biblical metaphors underscores the New Testament belief that those who share the life of faith constitute a “household” or “family.” Both these scholars have also been *pastors*, and I like to imagine, therefore, that they have a profounder-than-average feeling for the nuance of the metaphors. They have in any case kept before us such passages as this one from Ephesians 2: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are . . . members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

And this pertains, as we dare not overlook, to current controversy over the “endorsement” initiative high-level church administrators believe necessary to assure the fitness of Adventist religion teachers for their jobs (see news article on page 8). When implemented, this initiative would, through action culminating at division-level Boards for Ministerial and Theological Education, or BMTE’s, certify that teachers are teaching the church’s Statement of Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs. Said by administrators to be unwieldy, and by many educators (especially in the church’s older sectors) to be unwarranted and dangerous, the initiative is now undergoing refinement by a special Revision Task Force. The Task Force is considering objections, but focusing on operational

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efficiency. And, as happened before, objectors see the process as an effort, from outside colleges and universities themselves, to control thought on Adventist campuses.

I asked several members of the Revision Task Force to respond to four question (here briefly stated): Why put energy into this now? Why isn't board oversight of college and university goings-on adequate? Is anyone considering New Testament justifications for such bureaucratic interest in classroom uniformity? Might administrators bend before overwhelming opposition to the endorsement initiative in the church's long-established areas?

With respect to the last question, I was told that the endorsement idea is enshrined in General Conference Working policy, and has been for at least fifteen years. The Revision Task force has no authority to change church policy; its job is to make the policy *work*.

In the end, three persons from the Revision Task Force responded to me, all in a kindly and open spirit. One was Daniel Jiao, the Executive Secretary of the Chinese Union Mission; another was Richard Sabuin, Director of Education for the Northern Asia Pacific Division. Both are comfortable with the endorsement initiative as a means of useful collaboration. As Dr. Jiao said, it just assures that when far-flung Adventist colleges hire someone from elsewhere to teach Adventist thought, the person can be counted on to do so. It will be helpful, he suggested, in just the way ministerial credentials (for persons with pastoral responsibility) are helpful. (Jiao did not mention that, typically, religion teachers hold such credentials themselves.)

Ben Schoun, now semi-retired from the General Conference but still at the Revision Task Force helm, sent thoughtful responses meant to assuage campus worry but not, certainly, to eliminate it. He made, besides nuts-and-bolts clarifications, these key points:

1. Higher education boards tend more and more to limit their attention to the performance of institutional presidents, and

"too often" the president and his administrative colleagues "do not do anything about problems" the endorsement initiative is meant to address. Some teachers do shift away from full affirmation of the Fundamental Beliefs, or even "lose their faith" altogether. The church cannot allow such teachers to put Adventist college students at risk.

2. Although endorsement proper would be a function of the division-level committee, the process leading up to it would depend heavily on colleges and universities. Schoun said that appropriate school reviewers would "make sure" each religion teacher supports Adventist doctrine "as reflected in our Fundamental Beliefs," and make their recommendation in that light. If the Division BMTE should still have "questions about some teacher," these would be referred to the school for resolution. The question of *employment* itself would remain with the school.
3. The Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs *can*, according to its preamble, undergo change. So, teachers may certainly ask questions and develop new ideas, but the proper testing ground for these is "with other Adventist scholars" and, ultimately, with "the General Conference in session." Conversation of this kind should not occur "in the classroom."

These views, I emphasize, came in early August from someone who has responsibility for re-drafting the section of the denomination's ministerial training handbook that deals with this process. I cannot be sure, of course, that they reflect the feelings of the entire Task Force.

Certain premises do appear, however, to hold sway: substantial distrust of Adventist higher education, and confidence in bureaucratic enhancement as a meaning of coping with distrust; the use of a voted doctrinal statement—

Scriven editorial → continued on page 64....

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