

Reading and Misreading the Bible | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Official instincts about proper Bible reading continue to be partly right yet crucially wrong. One problem is that, for lack of willingness to converse—to speak *and* to listen, we continue to talk past one another. This lack baffles me. It hurts everyone and everything, not least discipleship itself.

In the “Week of Prayer” issue of *Adventist World, NAD Edition*, dated November 2017, the General Conference president lauds those daring Reformers who took the risk of translating Scripture into the languages of ordinary people. In several cases, they gave their lives for doing so, such was the fury of the church authorities, who distrusted the membership at large and thought access to the Bible would make them wander into heresy.

The instinct behind such praise is right, incontestably; so is the instinct behind quoting, as the president does, Ellen White’s declaration that Christians should not “depend on the minister” to read the Bible for them. Formal authority gives no certain advantage in interpretation. Every voice counts. No single voice or group of voices can have the last word.

Trouble comes, however, when the idea of the “plain reading of the text” joins itself, as in the article, to the implication that our “critical” capacities give no help in the interpretation of Scripture. Here I insert the word “implication” because in official theology the word “critical” is never (at least to my knowledge) straightforwardly anathematized. It’s just that the conventional invective against

the “historical-critical” method, here trotted out as usual, creates misgivings about it. The “historical-critical” approach to the Bible is associated (plausibly, I might add) with skeptical assumptions about the reality of God. But a good bit of it is useful even when, as with *every* community of Adventist Bible readers that I know, such skeptical assumptions are themselves called into question.

“Plain reading” without “critical” assessment is verifiably disastrous, principally because it prompts fixation on fragments of Scripture that, taken apart from their immediate or overall context, offer seeming support to one or another of our prejudices. This way of reading, let’s remember, gave us Bible-backed anti-Semitism and genocide in Europe, Bible-backed apartheid in South Africa, Bible-backed slavery in the American South. It’s tiresome to have to constantly repeat the point that these doctrines depended on the “plain reading” of small bits of the Bible, just as it is tiresome to have to bring up, again and again to plain readers, such a passage as Psalm 137:7, 8, where the beleaguered poet screams revenge against Israel’s “devastator” Babylon. For this poet, payback, even against children, brings happiness. “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Would a “plain reading” of these words, without help from our “critical” capacities, be at all edifying? If my finger fell by chance on these verses, would they be directly instructive for what I think of God or how I live my life?

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I believe, with the author of 2 Timothy, that *all* scripture is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (3:16). But that can be so only if we also confront another of the official instincts about Bible reading that turns out, in fact, to be *true*, again incontestably. The Bible is “vital-ly important,” says the General Conference president, “because it brings us face to face with Jesus Christ.” Yes. But his remarks, as is undeniably conventional in Adventism, and also undeniably misleading, fail to pay serious attention, or *any* attention, to Hebrews 1:1–3. In these verses the Good Book declares that God spoke in the past “through the prophets,” but has now spoken “by a Son” who is “the reflection of God’s glory and the *exact imprint* of God’s very being” (italics mine). And if words so crucial for biblical hermeneutics go unnoticed, so do equally crucial words from Jesus’ Gospel Commission in Matthew: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18). The same perspective on Christ’s authority, Zane Yi shows later in this issue of *Spectrum*, comes through in the story of the Transfiguration. Again, however, it doesn’t register.

But here, surely, is the true heartbeat of the idea that the Bible brings us face to face with Jesus Christ: He is the one point, the only point, at which the will and way of God come into perfect focus. That makes Him the lens you look through for *authentic Christian application of any biblical insight or story*. Now, knowing Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, you can consider, for example, the revenge theme in Psalm 137 and say (as C. S. Lewis did) that if such revenge is the “natural result” of suffering injury, it is nonetheless “profoundly wrong.” Its inclusion in Holy Writ may be God’s reminder that of all “bad men,” those who are religious are “the worst.” In any case, this psalm, in most ways so beautiful and mesmerizing, actually is, in its entirety, “useful” for teaching, correction, and training in righteousness. We get a reminder of how piety can go wrong.

At the November annual meetings, in Boston, of two of the church’s theological associations—the Adventist Society for Religious Studies and the Adventist Theological Society—speakers turned often to the theme of scriptural interpretation. At a Friday evening joint session, both presidents addressed the Bible, and one

of them, Olive Hemmings, of ASRS and Washington Adventist University, made a point similar to the one I am making. The right understanding of the Reformation *sola scriptura* principle, she said, upholds Christ as “the *logos*, the Truth, and the *telos*” of the written word. She was suggesting that Christ is the divine word, the divine reality, the divine purpose—made flesh. Christ alone, and no inanimate object, whether of wood or stone or paper, is God incarnate.

Again, and again, I tell myself: this should be the simplest of lesson in biblical hermeneutics. The Bible is a challenging book, encompassing different strands of thought and many kinds of stories. But the climax of its thought and stories is—Jesus, the “exact imprint” of divine being. Either this does not sink in, however, or conventional Adventist thinking simply doesn’t believe it, doesn’t believe that Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God, is the final criterion of Christian life and conviction. How can this be? How can it go on?

I myself wrote one of the papers presented in November. Shortly afterwards it hit me that I would personally speak to the need for more conversation about these matters. There is *scholarly* backing for a view similar to the one the General Conference president disseminates in his many articles and sermons. There is an official pronouncement, in the church’s Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, on the authority of the Bible. And in too much of what is said, reference to Christ is either inadequate or, as in the official statement of belief, missing altogether. So, I hereby announce that I am going to encourage representative people, along a wide range of opinion, into tangible, or *public*, conversation, either in print or in person, about these differences of hermeneutical outlook. I imagine something small, but I also imagine something *real*: something truly honest and forthright and something fully and appropriately responsive to the wisdom Jesus set down in Matthew, Chapter 18. I will move forward in hope, and, in time, I will report on what happens.

At my age and in my station, I am fully aware that the effort may be feckless or quixotic. But why should that matter? We are not called to success, but to witness. Surely we can agree, all of us, on that. ■

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