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**Scripture and Ideology**

**Calvinist Light on Reading—and Misreading—the Bible**

**by Charles Scriven**

Aside from the early church’s struggle with Gnosticism, it was the Reformation—“above all the Calvinistic Reformation”—that brought into “true focus” the “critical significance” of the Bible’s claim that “God is One and there is no other like Him.” These words are from Karl Barth, himself, of course, a Calvinist theologian. “Everything,” he continues, “depends on the practical and critical application of this knowledge of God as the unique, the one and only God”—not least, he adds, the Reformation “Scripture principle” itself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In what follows I will be exploring Calvinist thought precisely for its strengths and weaknesses with regard to the interpretation of Scripture. For illustration of the weaknesses, the paper will describe defenses, ostensibly Bible-based, of South African apartheid and of “headship” theology, both of which sprang from Calvinist, or Neo-Calvinist, communities. Of these two, the latter, taken up recently by Adventist opponents of gender equality in ministry, continues to have influence,[[2]](#footnote-2) thus assuring that the analysis here will bear not only on hermeneutics but also on the controversy over gender and justice. It turns out, as I will demonstrate, that official Adventist theory about Scripture echoes both what is perceptive and what is flawed in Calvinist tradition, and thus needs correction. But I will also demonstrate, with help from Barth, that the flaws can be set right through embrace of what is an essentially “Calvinistic” theme, namely, the Bible’s witness to God as the “one and only God.” The paper will end with the suggestion of simple, but utterly crucial, revisions to the account of scriptural authority given in the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Statement of 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

In 1536 John Calvin published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In its final form, published in 1559, the work is some 1,500 pages long and evinces throughout both high regard for, and profuse quotation of, Scripture. In a brief passage Barth himself cites in claiming that the “Calvinistic” Reformation elaborates insightfully on the doctrine that God is One, Calvin refers to Exodus 20:5, Matthew 4:10, Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9, Acts 10:25-26—you shall bow only before God; and Zechariah 14:9—“on that day the LORD will be one and his name one.” Nothing belonging to the one and only God can be “transferred” to something else. Any “reverential act that has been joined with religion cannot but savor of something divine,” he explains, and so detract from the “glory” of God. But you cannot “pluck away even a particle” of God’s glory without committing “sacrilege.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

How might a theory of biblical interpretation detract from divine glory? Precisely in the context of reflection about the Bible, how, on the other hand, might scrupulous confession that “God is One and there is no other like Him” uphold that glory? These questions are one way of stating the issue I am here putting before us.

We may begin with Calvin, in particular with the *Institutes*. Scripture, he writes, “clearly shows us the true God.” Here God “opens his own most hallowed lips.” Here we find what it pleases God “to witness of himself,” so that we may come to the “right knowledge” of the divine, all of which, Calvin remarks importantly, “is born of obedience.” Without Scripture we fall into “error,”[[4]](#footnote-4) so instead of finding our “conviction” in “human reasons, judgments, or conjectures,” we must consult the document in which God speaks “in person.” Faith that all this is so comes not by “disputation” but by “the inward testimony of the Spirit,” who persuades us that the “prophets” have “faithfully proclaimed” what God has “divinely commanded,” that Scripture has indeed “flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Do all the Bible’s parts agree with one another? Calvin says Yes,[[6]](#footnote-6) and underscores the point by insisting that appeals to the “teaching office” of the Holy Spirit cannot excuse “contempt” for “scriptural doctrine.” The Spirit does not invent “new and unheard-of revelations.” It is no “ignominy” for him “to agree with himself in all things.” He “is the Author of the Scriptures; he cannot vary and differ from himself.”[[7]](#footnote-7) All this suggests, or at least seems to suggest, agreement and consistency across the pages of the canon. Still, in a point that invites second thoughts, Calvin does allow, in book two of the *Institutes*, that the incarnation of Christ brings “far more light” than was earlier available. Only the Son has made God “‘known,’” he asserts, quoting John 1:18. God spoke through the prophets, but, as Hebrew 1:1-3 has it, the “only-begotten Son”—nothing else and no one else—is “‘the splendor of the glory of God the Father and the very stamp of his nature.’”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Does this latter point make a difference for true understanding of Scripture? And what about Calvin’s account of the Spirit’s “teaching office”? Does that, too, require another look? As a next step in the argument, consider now an infamous *misuse* of the Bible that emerged from a community steeped in Calvinist tradition; and also a still controversial interpretation that is likewise steeped in Calvinist tradition.

From1652, when the Dutch East India Company established a ship-fueling station at the Cape of Good Hope, white settlers and those who followed them, mainly Dutch Calvinists to begin, interacted with blacks in the southern part of Africa.[[9]](#footnote-9) These interactions were uneasy from the start, and had, by the mid-twentieth century, worsened into the infamous system of white domination known as apartheid. By then the white, governing authorities considered themselves, and their nation and its racial policies, to be devoutly Christian. The Dutch Reformed Church, spiritual home to most of the then-dominant Afrikaners, supported all of this, in part through the development of Bible-based arguments for, as some church leaders said, “total apartheid,” or apartheid “at national, social and religious levels.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Besides Calvin, these church leaders looked for insight to the hugely influential Dutch theologian and (at one point) prime minister, Abraham Kuyper. Many of them had trained at the Free University of Amsterdam, which Kuyper founded in 1880. His “neo-Calvinism,” as it came to be called, saw the reign of God as covering all aspects of life, including the nation as well as the family and church.[[11]](#footnote-11) One of its distinguishing marks was the derivation, from pertinent scriptural fragments, of “unchanging norms or ‘principles’” for Christian life. Kuyper was a gifted scholar, but his approach to Scripture tended, as one South African critic said, to be “biblicistic,” with “little respect for context or historical situation.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In any case, Dutch Reformed church leaders in South Africa did lapse into such a view of the Bible, and their arguments distorted Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism into a fully-fledged and apparently biblical ideology, or legitimation, of apartheid. These leaders discovered scriptural “principles” of diversity of peoples, of nationalism, and of racial separation even to the point of separate “homelands” for blacks in South Africa. Very typically, arguments in the late 1930s and early 1940s invoked such passages as the following: Genesis 11:1-9 (Babel, the point taken to be God-willed diversity), Acts 17:26 (divine establishment of the existence and boundaries of nations), Deuteronomy 32:8 (God-determined separate geographical areas for different peoples), Deuteronomy 7:2-4 and Joshua 23:12,13 (divine prohibition of intermixing and intermarriage). Without careful attention to possible alternative interpretations of these passages, or of their immediate or overall scriptural context, church leaders found here scriptural backing for the regime of white domination. With respect to familiar passages such as Galations 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, each well-suited to the questioning of apartheid, these pertained, they said, to “spiritual” unity and in no wise suspended “natural” differences.As for the nationalist ideology that was privileging whites and suppressing blacks, they failed even to consider the critique of concentrated power contained in biblical apocalyptic. At a meeting of Dutch Reformed leaders in 1951, demands for equality were, indeed, written off as merely “humanist.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

No scholars today, presumably, would endorse these arguments. But in form, and to some degree content, they bear noteworthy resemblance to the arguments that underwrite contemporary “headship theology.” Although absent in Adventist sources prior to the controversy over women’s ordination, this doctrine, first championed by a few evangelical Calvinists in the 1970s and 1980s, holds that spiritual leadership, or “headship over” others, is for men and not for women. Opponents of gender equality in ministry have made the doctrine a key part of their arsenal.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In the case of headship theology, as earlier for Dutch Reformed defenses of apartheid, a situation of privilege for one social group over another obtained *before* the specific arguments took shape, such that the new doctrine had a legitimating, or ideological, function. Here, too, the Neo-Calvinist notion of “unchanging principles” came into play, again through appeal to fragments of scripture adduced with little or no acknowledgment of possible alternative interpretations, or of their immediate or overall context. Consider, for example, Genesis 1:27 and 2:18-23 (male headship *before* the fall), 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:22 (man as “head” of woman; wives as “subject to” husbands),1 Timothy 2:11-15 (women silent, submissive, not permitted to teach). Such passages, it is said, simply *demonstrate* the principle of male headship.[[15]](#footnote-15) Ones that would complicate the case for male headship are either ignored or explained away. Galatians 3:28, in this latter category, affirms “an equal share in the blessings of salvation” for women and men, except that restrictions on the leadership potential of women remain. As for Acts 18:26, Priscilla does here teach the “Way of God” to Apollos, a man, but her work, unlike her husband’s, is merely “supportive”; it can be neither pastoral nor authoritative.[[16]](#footnote-16) And in a move that again recalls Dutch Reformed defenders of apartheid, architects of headship theology blame a secular source for the summons to gender equality: it comes from “feminism,” or from “our degenerate Western culture of modernism and post-modernism.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In the comparison I am making, the topics differ but the theory of biblical interpretation is similar. With respect to apartheid, the conclusions would draw universal condemnation; in the case of male headship, debate goes on. Both the agreement and disagreement evoke a question: How might the theory of biblical interpretation at work here be a problem? Could it even detract, as Calvin might say, from the glory of the one and only God?

When by the early 1980s Christian criticism of apartheid was beginning to flourish in South Africa, some scholars were alerting themselves to how the Calvinist Karl Barth had resisted Hitler’s regime even though most German-speaking pastors and theologians had not. Charles Villa-Vicencio noted Barth’s claim that the truth of the sentence “‘God is One’” is what made a “‘shipwreck’” of the Third Reich. That sentence undermines *all* “‘false gods,’” and explains, said Villa-Vicencio, why, in 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches finally “had to declare apartheid a heresy.”[[18]](#footnote-18) John De Gruchy, another South African, appealed to Barth’s critique of “‘unevangelical conservatism’” in his effort against church support for apartheid.[[19]](#footnote-19) By this Barth meant the Christian tendency to persist in present understanding, and thereby fend off the “living Word of the living Lord” who “in the power of the Holy Spirit”speaks “afresh to the Church in every situation.”The living Lord, Barth emphasized, is Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Yet the church’s comprehension of Christ falls always short, and in any case deals with ever-shifting circumstances; it must therefore be constantly renewed and reformed through “receptivity,” as he again insists, to “the living Word of the Living Prophet” that “establishes fresh knowledge in every age.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Here Barth might have reflected on Farewell Discourse remarks from Jesus found in John 16:12-15. He did not, nor did he ever, at least in the *Church Dogmatics*, examine this passage. But a crucial point appears in it, one that may be implied in Barth’s remarks but is here explicit and unmistakable. The Spirit will continue, says the gospel, to guide disciples into deeper understanding; it will continue to make Christ the criterion of that truth. And some of what disciples will learn they are not yet ready for. As Jesus puts it, “‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.’” In his teaching office, in other words, the Spirit declares the meaning of Christ’s lordship in the present, under new circumstances, and also nudges us, at a pace of God’s own choosing, toward insight it is painful to consider.

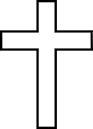
In their defense of headship theology, Edwin Reynolds and Clinton Wahlen speak dismissively of the notion of a “‘trajectory’” toward deeper Christian understanding such as some advocates of the ordination of women invoke.[[21]](#footnote-21) But such a trajectory is precisely—is unassailably—what John 16, Matthew 5, Hebrews 1 and numerous other passages actually imply. The official Adventist document, “Methods of Bible Study,” makes no explicit distinction between the written and Living Word—the Bible just *is* the Word of God; just *is* the (human) deliverance of God’s “thoughts, ideas and objective information.” Yet by speaking of “unfolding” revelation and citing Hebrew 1:1-3 to say that Christ is the “ultimate” disclosure of divine character, it does offer the barest hint of a trajectory. The document also calls the Bible “its own interpreter,”[[22]](#footnote-22) and by now it’s clear that any serious appeal to that idea must end up, based on the internal evidence, with a theory of divine communication such as the one pictured below:

**Divine Communication to Humanity**

*The Living Word The Living Word Incarnate The (Still) Living Word\**

Beginnings of Completion of

the Written Word the Written Word

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**\***Through the Holy Spirit, the (Still) Living Word teaches implications of his earthly words and life that humanity was once unable to bear (John 16:14-16); the (Still) Living Word also corrects mistaken interpretations that require new attention to the Living Word Incarnate. All this occurs through such conversation (“where two or three are gathered…”) as that proposed in Matthew18.

The distinction between the written word and the living Word, often obscured, in Calvin’s *Institutes* as well as Adventism’s “Methods of Bible Study,” simply acknowledges that the Bible—the pages, the ink, the binding—is inanimate. But it also acknowledges that any account of the Bible’s significance, and any theory of its proper interpretation, must wrestle with the fact of a trajectory of understanding whose sole criterion is the “One and only God,”the living, incarnate and still living Word celebrated in John 1 and John 16 and throughout the New Testament. As Barth said, at once assuming and clarifying the “Calvinistic” insistence on the oneness of God, for the Christian “Jesus Christ signifies God”; for the Christian “God is God in Jesus Christ.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Or as the Anabaptist Bernard Rothmann, whose movement so informs our own, declared: “The content of the whole Scripture is briefly summarized in this: Honour and fear God the almighty in Christ his Son.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

No theory that allows construction of doctrine out of mere fragments of Scripture—fragments considered independently of immediate and overall context—can withstand the criticism implicit in these points. No theory of the Bible that overlooks growth in its perspective; no theory that attributes every command or insight directly to God; no theory, in other words, that so divinizes Scripture as to “pluck away even a particle” of the divine glory *revealed in Christ*, can prevail in a truly faithful Christian community. I do not here judge the opposing sides of the debate about women’s ordination, except to say that opponents must themselves wrestle with the fact of a trajectory. As for the ideology of apartheid propounded by Dutch Reformed theologians in South Africa, it built itself on fragmentary biblical support, “defused” Christological criticism,[[25]](#footnote-25) and overlooked the (particularly pertinent) book of Revelation.[[26]](#footnote-26) In the light before us now, that is all that needs to be said.

Such Adventist scholars as Edward W. H. Vick and Zane Yi have been advancing an account similar to the one presented here.[[27]](#footnote-27) It must now become explicit in all Adventist thinking, and the most effective way to assure that it does is by revision of Belief No. 1 in the church’s Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. I propose a revision as the conclusion of these remarks:

**Belief No.1**

**(Key revisions bold-faced)**

**Current**

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12.)

**Revised**

Holy Scripture, Old and New Testaments alike, is the written Word of God, delivered by authors and editors who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. It tells the story**—the unfolding revelation**—of God on earth, and thus communicates the knowledge necessary for our salvation. **Interpreted in the light of Christ, who alone is the exact imprint of God’s being, and under the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit**, it constitutes the ultimate written authority for Christian life. Holy Scripture is trustworthy. It is the measure of doctrine and character. From beginning to end, it is profitable for teaching and training the church and its members. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; **John 16:12-15**, 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; **Heb. 1:1-3**, 4:12.)

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), II/1, 444-445. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gerry Chudleigh, *A Short History of the Headship Doctrine in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Gerry Chudleigh at Smashwords, 2014, <https://www.smashwords.com>, accessed October 30, 2017), chaps. 1 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.12.1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 1.6.1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 1.7.4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 1.8.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 1.9.1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 2.9.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I am not expert on Dutch Reformed church life in South Africa, but have consulted, among others, the following volumes: John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); J. A. Loubser, *A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa: The Apartheid Bible* (Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); and Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid* (New York: Orbis, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This phrase came into use, among Dutch Calvinist leaders, at least by 1943, some five years before a political regime committed to apartheid policy won election in South Africa in 1948. See Loubser, 60-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Thompson, 29-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jaap Durand, “African Piety and Dissent,” in De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, *Resistance*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Loubser 56-57, 79.For the characterization, in the paragraph’s latter half, of biblical arguments used by South African ideologues, I rely especially on Loubser, 56-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Chudleigh, *A Short History*, chap. 6.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Here I rely on the headship movement’s signature “Danvers Statement,” available at <https://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/> (accessed November 6, 2017), and on Edwin E. Reynolds and Clinton Wahlen, “Women in Scripture and Headship,” *Spectrum* 41, no. 4: 47-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On Galatian 3:28, see the “Danvers Statement,” cited above. On Acts 18:26, see Reynolds and Wahlen, 49, 51, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Chudleigh, chaps. 2 and 6; and Reynolds and Wahlen, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Charles Villa-Vicencio, “An All-Pervading Heresy: Racism and the ‘English-Speaking Churches,’” De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, 73. Barth’s words are from *CD*, II/1, 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John W. De Gruchy, “Towards a Confessing Church: The Implications of a Heresy,” in De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Barth, *CD* IV/3, 813, 818, 817, 819, 821. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Reynolds and Wahlen, 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Methods of Bible Study,” available here <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/methods-of-bible-study/> (accessed October 19, 2017). The first quoted phrase is from section 2, the others from section “4,” though this latter seems actually to be the third section. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Barth, *CD* IV/3, 798, 800. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Quoted in Walter Klaassen, *et al.*, eds, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This point, and the specific verb, appear Durand, Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The appearance, in the late 1980s, of South African Reformed theologian Allan A. Boesak’s *Comfort an Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos*, was a trenchant correction to this oversight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Edward W. H. Vick, *From Inspiration to Understanding: Reading the Bible Seriously and Faithfully* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2011), discussed helpfully in James J. Londis, “Taking the Bible Seriously in Edward W. H. Vick’s Theology,” *Spectrum* 44, no. 2: 70-75; and Zane Yi, “Christ and the Conflict of Interpretations,” delivered at an Adventist Forum Conference earlier in 2017 and forthcoming in *Spectrum* 45, no. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)