Beyond Emergent

A close look at the Emerging Church movement reveals some familiar—and predicted—challenges.

Cindy Tutsch

Relating to the Bible

How to interpret Scripture—God's Holy Word—is one of the most crucial issues in the life of a Christian.

Roy E. Gane

Principles of Worship and Liturgy

Worship and liturgy should reflect something far more than culture or personal preference.

Fernando Canale
Beyond Emergent

_A close look at the Emerging Church movement reveals some familiar—and predicted—challenges._

Cindy Tutsch

Like quantum physics, “Emergent/Emerging Church” is not easily defined, managed, or imaged. The Emerging Church is not a denomination, nor does it speak with one voice. As a fractal in its constant repeating of shapes and cycles, “Emergent” does not exhibit exactly the same structure in all places, yet there are identifiable similarities.

The movement “emerged” or “sprouted out” of the foundations of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the late 20th and early 21st century, as a reaction to both the dead formalism of traditional worship styles and the slick marketing style of the megachurch approach. Adherents sometimes refer to the movement as a “conversation” that is fluid, non-structured, and focused on the believer’s story, or narrative.

_Emergent_ is usually a reference to a specific organization, initially called “Emergent Village,” whose principal spokesperson is Brian McLaren.1 _Emerging_, by contrast, often refers to a global wave of decentralized spirituality with roots in postmodern theology and literature as well as the traditions and mysticism of the ancient “desert fathers” (both Catholic and Orthodox), and ancient forms of Judaism. Leaders of Emergent and Emerging groups look for meaning in acts of benevolence and charity, neo-monasticism, and contextualized mission, focusing on inclusiveness, non-judgmental connections, and ecumenism. Scripture becomes secondary to relationships (essentially, the Emergent view of Scripture becomes an adaptation of neo-orthodoxy); absolute Truth yields to pluralism and relativism. Buzz words such as dialogue and reconciliation replace creeds, dogmatism, and boundaries.

The Emerging family can be divided into at least three groups:2

- **Relevants**: concerned primarily with contextualizing worship styles while maintaining a deep commitment to traditional evangelical authority structures, including male pastoral leadership.

- **Reconstructionists**: promote change of both church form and structure but strongly influenced by less hierarchical Anabaptist, Mennonite, and even pre-Constantinian church models.

- **Revisionists** (most visible and controversial): question key evangelical beliefs such as substitutionary atonement, Jesus as an exclusive path to salvation, deity and incarnation of Christ, the significance of the Cross, separation from God, depravity (humanity’s sinful nature), grace-inspired obedience, judgment, evil, heaven, and hell. Spokespersons, proponents, and partnering organizations include Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Charles Swindoll, Eugene Peterson,
Dallas Willard, and Youth Specialties.

The Perceived Spiritual Need

Though Emergent/Emerging groups advocate new forms of worship as a means of experiencing deeper connection with one another and with God, many also advocate a change of Christian theology to better explain theological concepts such as love, forgiveness, suffering, death, and grace. They believe that the truth about these concepts emerges out of progressive dialogue. Thus, although the Bible may be a conversation partner in the community dialogue, it is seen as only one voice among many, with minimal or no authority for establishing and living out truth. The perceived need is for an outcome that will be progressively determined by the participants of the dialogue. The core of the Emergent paradigm is “both/and” rather than “either/or.”

Many thought leaders of the movement believe that both traditional churches and seeker churches fail to speak in language or worship formats that are friendly to postmoderns. However, the perceived need is for a core change at the foundational levels of philosophy and theology. Emergents believe that modernism does not provide answers to the deepest longings of the human spirit. In Emergent thought, those needs and longings can be met only through a reality that can be known from the interpretation or experience of the individual or community.

Positive Aspects to Emergent/Emerging

Emerging thought resists the idea that Christ’s death was in any way intended to appease the Father. Emergents usually reject the concept of eternal suffering in hell fire, as well as the dead formality of many mainline denominations. They are welcoming to persons of all persuasions, and seek to establish a sense of community among the “walking wounded.” They allow space for seekers, skeptics, and persons at various points in their faith journey.

Emergents are ardent advocates of missional community involvement and compassionate activism for the marginalized. They are open to exploring new truths found through open dialogue, and are eager to find answers for human suffering. Emergents want spirituality to touch them at their deepest levels, providing an antidote for disappointment and abandonment. They are concerned with the preservation of God’s creation and often care passionately for the environment. At this time, they refuse to align with the traditional political movement of many evangelicals in the United States, who push for an integration of church and state in the culture wars.

Nevertheless, these positives could be strengthened if expressed in a biblical context. These activities and ideas can help satisfy this generation’s deep hunger for meaning and purpose in life, but not if they are disassociated from Scripture. New paths to genuine spirituality must not stray from the Word of God!

The Possibility of Counterfeit Spirituality

Through the ages, humanity has persisted in seeking spirituality through a dependence on
human works, including sacraments, the occult, mysticism, pantheism, panentheism, Gnosticism, monasticism, and other works-based endeavors to experience God. Movements or organizations that have promoted and continue to promote these approaches include Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Spiritualists, Mormons, New Age, Neo-Protestants, and Emergent. All of these groups retain elements of biblical truth but all deny Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12) and/or the Bible as the Christian’s ultimate authority.

Both Scripture and the writings of Ellen White issue cautions about a counterfeit spirituality that will closely resemble genuine spirituality:

- “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Cor. 11:13-15, NKJV).
- “For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty” (Rev. 16:14, NKJV).
- “There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 14:12, NRSV).
- “For who has stood in the council of the Lord so as to see and to hear his word? Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? Look, the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings” (Jer. 23:18-22, NRSV).
- “The track of truth lies close beside the track of error, and both tracks may seem to be one to minds which are not worked by the Holy Spirit, and which, therefore, are not quick to discern the difference between truth and error.”
- “Before the final visitation of God’s judgments upon the earth there will be among the people of the Lord such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times. . . . The enemy of souls desires to hinder this work; and before the time for such a movement shall come, he will endeavor to prevent it by introducing a counterfeit. In those churches which he can bring under his deceptive power he will make it appear that God’s special blessing is poured out; there will be manifest what is thought to be great religious interest. Multitudes will exult that God is working marvelously for them, when the work is that of another spirit. Under a religious guise, Satan will seek to extend his influence over the Christian world.”
- “Wherever men neglect the testimony of the Bible, turning away from those plain, soul-testing truths which require self-denial and renunciation of the world, there we may be sure that God’s blessing is not bestowed. And by the rule which Christ Himselves has given, ‘Ye shall know them by their fruits’ (Matthew 7:16), it is evident that these movements are not the work of the Spirit of God.”
Dangers of Emerging/Emergent Trends to the Seventh-day Adventist Movement and Mission

The heart of the Seventh-day Adventist message is the atonement demonstrated at the cross of Christ, and the urgency of preparation for Christ’s return. Emergents minimize or negate the value of Christ’s blood sacrifice, and prefer to emphasize the kingdom of grace today over imminence of the kingdom of glory. There is almost no discussion of the *parousia* in Emergent literature or teaching, since for many Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is the *parousia*. There is danger that Adventism becomes influenced by Emergent thought to also diminish emphasis on the literal and imminent coming of Jesus, and the necessity of preparation for that event.

Seventh-day Adventists place a high value on the authority of Scripture over and (sometimes necessarily) against tradition, experience, and reason (knowledge, i.e., science) that conflicts with Scripture. For Emergents, experience and subjective revelation trump Scripture. Absolute truth does not exist; all truth is relative to each person’s experience. Thus, no moral judgments can be made about evil. Where there is no evil, there can be no call to repentance and no freedom from guilt through the blood of Jesus because there is no sin.

Rather than construct ethics from the foundation of Scripture, Emerging thought sees ethics as constructed within community, which Tony Jones describes as a “relational hermeneutic” for discovering reality. This can become correlationism or radical constructivism. Thus, Emergent thought has no biblical anchor; community, not revelation, forms the Emergents’ worldview. In consequence, the power of the exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ is missing, and Emergents try to fill this void by seeking spirituality through ancient mystical practice.

In every culture and in every society, there are diabolical elements which must be challenged. Emergents fail to see that the gospel sometimes mandates a countercultural message. In some cases, an uncritical contextualization of the gospel has introduced syncretism. It has sometimes even become difficult to distinguish Emergent from the theory of universalism. Nobody left out, ever, and nobody judged, ever, is non-biblical and at direct cross-purposes to the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14.

Though claiming to be community oriented, Emergent worship is highly individualistic in that it places greater value on one’s personal story and personal interpretations than on worshiping God through the biblical model of repentance, forgiveness, and praise. In biblical worship, the worshiper is drawn to a sense of his or her own unworthiness and need of a Savior (Isa. 6:1-5) and finds release from guilt and burdens through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness provided through the crucified and risen Christ and the burden-bearing Christ (Acts 2:21-36). Singing, then, becomes a paean of praise and adoration from worshipers who have been saved by grace and have
found release from their burdens at Calvary.

Adventists who focus worship more on contextualization and the self than on Christ and His Word may in actuality become nothing more than mirrors of the culture, particularly the more corroding aspects of music, art, and film. Because they are not promoting reverent but joyful worship that is in contrast to the world around them, the worship experience can become irrelevant, the very opposite of its purpose.

Adventists who seek spirituality through labyrinths, Stations of the Cross, incense, candles, mantra or repetitive-word meditation, and other mystical or Eastern rituals hope to find a multisensory experience of worship that will deepen their experience with God. Sometimes justification for these externals is found in the idea that we now create our own meaning from these trappings. The context, however, that provided spiritual significance to these perceived aids to deeper spirituality is the mystery of iniquity predicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4. Though Adventists may consider these mere practices that foster theological imagination and spiritual growth, at their core these practices are replacing free access to the Personhood of our Heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, with a human-centered experience that is based on works and ritual.

The Emergent Eucharist, with its emphasis on the power of the man-priest to control the Christ through a modified transubstantiation, is becoming increasingly central in Emergent practice. Thus again, the beauty of the message of Christ our Righteousness, Christ our High Priest, Christ our accessible Savior, is diluted by the intrusion of human mediation. Though there may be benefits from having a Christian mentor or life coach to help in sorting out some of life’s complexities and providing Bible-based focus, there is concern over the possible implications of the designation “life coach” that some Adventists are giving themselves. Isn’t the Holy Spirit our life coach? Could “life coach” edge perilously close to human mediation between God and humanity? Do we need a human coach to find authentic spirituality, particularly if that coach is minimizing the authority of the Word of God?

It is possible that the Emergent gravitation toward Catholic and Orthodox ritual and traditions, Eastern practice, and mysticism that edges toward occultism, could be the spearhead of the coalition of apostate Protestantism, spiritualism, and Catholicism that Seventh-day Adventists have historically believed would integrate church and state, with the subsequent loss of religious freedom. Leading spokespersons for Emergents, or proponents of Emergents, such as Rick Warren, Leonard Sweet, Tony Jones, Brian McLaren, and many others are pushing toward breaking down the walls of denominational barriers and moving toward a new ecumenism. This appears to be a fulfillment of Revelation 13:3.

In words that appear prescient today, Ellen White wrote: “The wide diversity of belief in the Protestant churches is regarded by many as decisive proof that no effort to secure a forced uniformity can ever be made. But there has been for years, in churches of the Protestant faith, a strong and growing sentiment in favor of a union based upon common points of doctrine. To secure such a union, the discussion of subjects upon which all were not agreed—however important they might be from a Bible standpoint—must necessarily be waived. . . . When the leading churches of the United States,
uniting upon such points of doctrine as are held by them in common, shall influence the state to enforce their decrees and to sustain their institutions, then Protestant America will have formed an image of the Roman hierarchy, and the infliction of civil penalties upon dissenters will inevitably result.”

Ellen White may be defining postmodern spiritualism when she states, "Even in its present form, so far from being more worthy of toleration than formerly, [spiritualism] is really a more dangerous, because a more subtle, deception. While it formerly denounced Christ and the Bible, it now professes to accept both. But the Bible is interpreted in a manner that is pleasing to the unrenewed heart, while its solemn and vital truths are made of no effect. Love is dwelt upon as the chief attribute of God, but it is degraded to a weak sentimentalism, making little distinction between good and evil. God’s justice, His denunciations of sin, the requirements of His holy law, are all kept out of sight. . . . Pleasing, bewitching fables captivate the senses and lead men to reject the Bible as the foundation of their faith. Christ is as verily denied as before; but Satan has so blinded the eyes of the people that the deception is not discerned.”

Increasingly powerful economic, political, religious, and social forces, such as the growth in the number of countries linked to the capitalist system and the spread of information and social networking systems that connect people globally, may soon cause radical shifts in world religions and concepts of religious liberty. In this projected milieu, Emergent thought may play a more significant role than many Adventists imagine.

Retreat centers, seminars, and worship experiences that focus on mystical rituals and ancient practices are often seeking to find “the God within.” In the ensuing blur of sacred, secular, and mystical, the God who transcends the universe vanishes and is replaced by pantheism or panentheism. Thus, the Creator God cannot be distinguished or worshiped over creation. As a result, each person’s interpretations or ideas are as valuable, or perhaps even more valuable, than the expressed Word of God in Scripture.

The postmodern Emergent mixes the sacred and the profane, the holy and the unholy, God and culture in ways that make it impossible to call individuals out of false worship (Rev. 14:8; 18:1-4) because truth is culturally conditioned and there is therefore no such thing as “false worship.” Further, if God is ”in” Babylon, why would there be a necessity of calling individuals out of it? This inclusiveness is in direct opposition to the biblical teaching of differences between sacred and common, good and evil (Lev. 10:8-10; Eze. 22:26; Isa. 5:20).

Adventists, particularly those in youth ministries and seeker-friendly church plants, are looking for ways to “cast the net in new directions” in the laudable effort to win a postmodern culture to Jesus Christ. If we are uncritical in our efforts to be innovative, however, there is danger of losing the heart of the gospel, the authority of Scripture, and our identity as Seventh-day Adventists.

**Adventism: A Unique Spirituality**

Many persons might argue that Adventism is primarily propositional. The heart of Adventism,
however, is Jesus Christ, who invites His creation to come into relationship with Him. Since Jesus
said, “I am . . . the truth” (John 14:6, NRSV), we could infer that truth can be equated both with
doctrine and with a relationship with the Person who is the Source of that doctrine. In a sense, both
justification and sanctification are highly experiential since both are dependent on a living, working,
dynamic relationship with Christ. Because Jesus declares Himself to be God (8:58), the Word (1:1-4,
14), and is declared by Paul to be the Creator God (Col. 1:13-17), He offers a way to God that is
superior to any other religion or methodology (John 14:6). Adventists come, then, into special
relationship with God every seventh-day Sabbath when we rejoice in His dual creation (Ex. 20:8-11;
Eph. 1:7).

The genuine spiritual need of all Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, is to be filled with
the power of the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit into the heart of the believer brings all of
Heaven’s blessings in its train. The deep, authentic spirituality that the Spirit brings is conditional
on obedience (Acts 5:32), which is joyously rendered as a response to God’s grace.

God wants to use Adventists as His agents to call people out of Babylon, so that they do not
receive of Babylon’s plagues, and so that they can be new creatures in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is
calling His people to conversion and holiness, to a complete transformation from one way of life to
another. This is accomplished through repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing from our sins through
the blood of Jesus. Christ’s atoning grace, worked out in our lives through the agency of the Spirit, is
not legalism or dead formalism. It is victory, liberation, and joy! Jesus calls us to belief, commitment,
and certainty in His power to transform our lives and redeem us at last. This is the depth of the call to
authentic spirituality that we are to make in these uncertain and chaotic times.

We engage in social reform, obedience, and moral living not to find meaning in life, not merely
to make the current world a better place, but as a response to Christ’s grace. Our goal is not to
achieve deep spirituality as an end in itself. God’s goal for our spirituality is transformation of all that
we are (Col. 3:1-17). Christ is the indisputable, anchored center for Seventh-day Adventist
Christians. He is Substitute, Savior, and Model. Because He served, we serve. Because He loved, we
love. We recognize in Him the exclusive means of salvation.

Adventism models a community with biblical boundaries—boundaries that help prevent chaos
within the community, disintegration into disputing factions, and heresy. Adventists have boundaries
(1 Cor. 6:9-11), beliefs and doctrines, and ethical parameters (Matt. 7:15-20; 1 John 2:22;
3:14-15). We are not ashamed of the relation-driven statement that there are responsibilities and
privileges in belonging to God’s family. An ecclesiology that includes elders and deacons is biblical
and modeled in the early Christian Church (Acts 14:23).

Rather than tradition informing our theology and serving as an outside marker to help us know
when we have moved from biblical fidelity, Seventh-day Adventists have the contemporary prophetic
voice of Ellen White. We are not immune to the beckoning of the decadent aspects of our culture
(Rom. 12:2), and God in His graciousness has sent a “lesser light” to point to a “greater light” that
reminds us of our accountability to Christ and His Way.
In the Adventist sanctuary doctrine, which is unique to our movement, we find a visual merger of relationship (Christ our High Priest), ancient roots (the Judaic sanctuary rituals), and a common history (unfolding dialogue between the people and God). Satan targets this highly symbolic yet relational motif because it is the very heart of God’s will and instructions regarding redemption, mission, spirituality, and even worship (2 Chron. 29:25). The artistic symbols and sanctuary services found within the Bible, particularly the books of Hebrews, Daniel, and Revelation, then become a conveyor of truth, providing us with a model or system correlating theology and liturgy. Based on the sanctuary model, our worship will begin with respect and awe of our Creator God, it will lead to grateful acknowledgement of His power and holiness through prayer and praise and preaching, remind us of our need of His redemptive grace, cause us to accept His loving, atoning sacrifice, and motivate us for service.

Can we grow as a movement? Are there reminders within Emergent/Emerging thought of areas we could strengthen? Absolutely! Adventism as a movement, while modeling a Christocentric approach to education, healing, publishing, and religion, has been less successful at modeling sustained proactive opposition to ills that permeate and destroy society, such as media violence, gambling, human trafficking, and pornography. We could also hope that as a result of people being profoundly transformed by the gospel, an increasing number of Adventist churches would develop that are characterized by both strong biblical preaching and strong community outreach.

Ellen White promotes a healthy enthusiasm in the presence of God, coupled with reverent, expectant joy. Adventist worship services should be “intensely interesting,” participatory, and not rigidly formal. Many Adventists could strengthen their faith by practicing more biblical spiritual disciplines, such as fasting and God-centered prayer. We need to grow toward these ideals.

Today there are strong feelings of dissatisfaction with the superficiality of contemporary life. Members are leaving mainline and megachurches in large numbers because the abandonment of sola scriptura underlies a failure to meet the need for authentic deep spirituality. Hence the door is open wide for religious phenomena such as the Emergent church. But the door is also open wide for a church that holds uncompromisingly to the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, and unfailingly proclaims the message of salvation through Christ alone.

Cindy Tutsch, D.Min., is Associate Director of the Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, Maryland.

REFERENCES
5. Ibid., pp. 464, 465.
6. Manuscript Releases, vol. 5, p. 227. The result of these exercises, whether or not the participant is cognizant of this goal, is to achieve altered states of consciousness, making the participant vulnerable to satanic spiritual influences.
10. Ibid., p. 558, italics supplied.
15. Ibid., pp. 317, 318.
16. Ibid., p. 609.

» Back to top
How to interpret Scripture—God’s Holy Word—is one of the most crucial issues in the life of a Christian.

Roy E. Gane

Many people associate higher criticism of the Bible with the development of modern thought. But the truth is that for nearly two millennia, people have sought ways to evade or deflate the broad and sweeping biblical claim that, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, NRSV, italics supplied). How much of the Bible is that? “All scripture.” Of course, many named and unnamed human authors and editors participated in producing the anthology we know as the Bible. But God directed the thoughts of these people, who were His co-workers (2 Peter 1:20, 21).

This self-characterization of the Bible has always been under attack because it makes an enduring system of divine principles, rather than human ideas, the guide for belief and lifestyle. Divine principles are to be interpreted and applied within cultural contexts, but they are not to be revised or manipulated to accommodate human desires for control or comfort. As the Word of God, the Bible is to edit our lives; we are not to edit the Bible. This is monumentally inconvenient for human compulsions, including pride and the desire to condone a huge array of sins.

Through the centuries—and today more than ever—people try in various ways to avoid scriptural messages and to make the Bible say what they want it to say. Their approach is characterized by what could be called “higher-critical thinking.” In the past, the term “higher criticism” has been applied more narrowly to modes of scholarly historical-critical inquiry, such as source, form, and redaction criticism. But historical criticism is not an isolated phenomenon; its basic philosophy regarding the Bible also underlies other ways to neutralize the Word of God. Higher-critical thinking manifests itself in a number of ways:

1. **Cut it out.** Thomas Jefferson simply cut out of the Bible everything he didn’t accept, especially including miracles. His radically edited version was known as “The Jefferson Bible.” That is accurate because it was his bible; it was no longer God’s Bible. By own brilliant but finite human wisdom, which he valued above that of the infinite Creator of the universe, Jefferson fashioned his own authority and was happily in charge. He had neutered the transforming power of God’s Word.

2. **Supplement it.** Another approach is to “respectfully” leave the Bible as it is, but to add an overlay of human interpretation that bends or obscures its meaning. Jesus opposed those who did this:
"He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, “Honor your father and your mother,” and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” But you say that whoever tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,” then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God’” (Matt. 15:3-6).

According to Christ, the whole Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is based on love for God and other human beings (Matt. 22:37-40). This is because the purpose of the Bible is to reveal our divine Savior (John 20:30, 31), whose character is love (1 John 4:8). But human legalism, masquerading as piety to selectively "protect" biblical principles, rather than the people whom these principles are designed to protect, kidnaps the principles from their home of love and forces them to serve selfish human interests. The so-called “Christian era” has seen human supplements piled on one another. Reformers have escaped many of these only to have their followers amass new systems of them. Human ideas and ways of doing things can be good, helpful, and necessary, but often even good ones take on a life of their own with overblown importance as defining characteristics of a group that eclipse more important values.

3. **Treat it as obsolete.** Another strategy to change the Bible’s meaning is to treat at least some of it as obsolete. Thus many “New Testament Christians” treat the (Jewish) Old Testament as less valuable. For example, the laws of Moses are routinely ignored because they are supposedly superseded by Jesus’ new (actually renewed) covenant of love (John 13:34), disregarding Jesus’ own statement that the whole Old Testament is based on love. Also, the biblical seventh-day Sabbath is superseded by traditional “Christian” Sunday worship (not established by the New Testament) or by the everyday experience of entering into God’s rest (Hebrews 4; actually an experience of faith also available in Old Testament times).

It is true that the Old Testament contains culturally conditioned elements (for example, levirate marriage: Deut. 25:5-10) and penalties applicable under direct divine rule (for example, Leviticus 24:13-23) that we should not try to carry out today. But the laws of Moses encapsulate enduring and authoritative principles that benefit those who observe them in the right way and for the right reasons.²

Also, the New Testament contains time- and place-specific elements for our instruction, such as the debate over circumcision and its resolution (Acts 15). We do not live in the Second Temple Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural world of the New Testament. But we can learn from the ways in which God led His people during that period, applying His enduring principles within our own life contexts. We ignore divine teaching at our peril. We need all the help we can get.

4. **Treat it as merely human.** During the so-called “Age of Enlightenment” (mainly in the 1700s), brilliant thinkers asserted that authority over human life was primarily based on human reason. The Bible, which establishes paramount divine authority, got in the way of this notion. So some learned individuals claimed that at least parts of the Bible are merely a human production, which brings these portions down to the level of human reason. This approach, which is still
widespread in biblical scholarship, claims that the Word of God is contained in Scripture, but there are parts of Scripture that are not the Word of God.

If some parts of the Bible record or reflect authentic messages from God and others do not, the huge problem is how to differentiate between these components. The process is somewhat like an archaeological excavation, which sifts through a lot of material to find what is valuable. With regard to a prophetic book, such as Ezekiel, the question is: Which words originated with the prophet himself, who had direct access to God, and which words were added later by other people, whose thoughts were merely their own?

In a seminar on Ezekiel at the University of California, Berkeley in 1982, visiting professor Moshe Greenberg (from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) told our class about the range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel. The most conservative said that two-thirds of the book went back to the prophet. The most radical (Holscher) had rather arbitrarily decided that Ezekiel wrote only in a poetic style, of which he found the prophet Ezekiel’s to be only 17 verses out of 48 chapters. With disagreement of such magnitude, how can anyone be sure what comes from God?

Scholars have developed finely tuned “tools” to identify original human elements in the Bible’s formation, such as authors/sources, editors/redactors, literary forms/genres arising from particular life situations, and the origin and development of units of traditional material cited in the Bible. It is true that human sources, redactors, forms, and traditions have played important roles in development of Scripture. But the Bible supplies only sketchy information regarding these, in accord with its own concern to project its messages as originating from God.

Of course, it is legitimate to investigate all information that the Bible provides regarding its human authorship, including its authors/sources, editors, literary forms, etc. But solid biblical information is not enough for “critical” scholars bent on virtually editing the biblical text by attempting to separate human from divine material. So they rely on internal literary clues—such as narrative disconnects (real or apparent) and differences in style—to reconstruct speculatively different strands of authorship.

It is true that the Bible contains different strands of authorship. Books such as Numbers, Chronicles, and Luke explicitly state that they used some oral or written sources. There were also editors, such as the anonymous individual(s) who added Deuteronomy 34 regarding Moses’ death. But scholars go beyond solid evidence to hypothetically reconstruct Yahwistic (J), Elohistic (E), Deuteronomistic (D), and Priestly (P) sources of the Pentateuch, dating from centuries after Moses, whose historical existence is disbelieved or doubted.

If there was no Moses as the primary human author of the books attributed to him by Jesus and the apostles (e.g., Luke 24:27), he did not receive authoritative messages from God, including instructions for a sanctuary and its services that could serve as an accurate typology of greater and future salvific realities (e.g., Hebrews 7–10). In fact, many critical scholars do not believe that the sanctuary, including the ark of the covenant, ever existed as material, historical entities; they consider them to be only imaginative inventions of Israelite folklore.
The terms criticism, critical, or critic can be positive, as when an art critic analyzes a Rembrandt painting, a rhetorical critic uncovers a literary arch pattern that helps us to understand and appreciate a prophetic oracle, or a textual critic sorts through variants in biblical manuscripts. But source, form, redaction, and tradition criticism are modes of so-called “higher-criticism” that impose human reason over the Bible in ways that affect how people receive its meaning, message, credibility, and authority. Reason itself is good and God-given as an indispensable ally of faith, but reason that displaces God is arrogant and ultimately unreasonable.

Modern critical scholarship of the Bible claims to be scientific. But it routinely breaks one of the cardinal rules of science by attempting to build conclusions on analysis of data that it has altered through speculation to fit its presuppositions. A biologist, chemist, or social scientist would not last long if he or she indulged in a circular approach by adding to or taking away from raw material or data that was supposed to serve as the subject of investigation. But biblical scholars reach the highest levels of academia by publishing erudite theories based on humanly edited versions of the biblical text.

Several years ago, I was on an escalator with Rolf Rendtorff, a prominent German biblical scholar, after attending a session on Pentateuchal source criticism at an annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. In response to the papers and discussion that they had just heard, Rendtorff remarked, “I want to work with real texts, not homemade texts.”

On another occasion, Isaac Kikawada, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley and co-author of Before Abraham Was... remarked to me that the J, E, D, and P sources of pentateuchal authorship are “scholarly phantoms that exist only in the minds of scholars.” He too wanted to work with real texts, and viewed attempts to identify original messages from God in Scripture (as opposed to merely human additions) as a kind of “misguided fundamentalism.”

When Moshe Greenberg told our class about the range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel, I asked him where his forthcoming Anchor Bible Commentary on this biblical book would fit in the spectrum. He replied that his work would not likely be regarded as a critical commentary because he does not believe that the task of a commentator should include editing the text of Scripture. This revealed (1) his integrity as a researcher who does not alter his data, and (2) his understanding that the word critical in the context of “historical-critical commentary” refers to a process that involves editing the biblical text, which has come down to us in various manuscript forms, in a speculative attempt to reconstruct an original (and therefore divinely authoritative) text. Critical does not simply mean that a scholar takes all available and relevant contextual, linguistic, and historical data into account when interpreting the text, as Greenberg does in a masterfully comprehensive way.

It is true that critical scholars and their commentaries have made great contributions to our understanding of the Bible, which we can identify only if we are well equipped to differentiate between real data with conclusions logically derived from it versus speculative interpretations. But in recent decades, many biblical scholars have moved away from frustrating attempts to reconstruct earlier phases of the text, which have yielded endless debates about identification of human agents.
involved in authorship and the extent of their activities, but have not contributed to confidence in divine messages. These scholars prefer to focus on the rich history, meaning, and literary artistry of the existing Bible, which presents enough challenges and rewards for everyone.

Some in the church have thought that they can safely use the tools of the historical-critical method without the skeptical presuppositions associated with them. (This would include, for example, rejecting as unhistorical anything, such as miracles, that cannot be established by such means as analogy or correlation.) Others reject this approach, claiming that the presuppositions are inherent in the tools.

Given that the Bible does give some information regarding its human authorship, a Christian who accepts the whole Bible as the Word of God can legitimately analyze this data regarding sources, forms, and editing/redaction, etc., much the same way a historical critic would analyze it.

However, labeling this a “critical” approach is problematic because critical in this context commonly means “higher-critical,” a procedure with the goal of editing the biblical text. The research of a historical-critic may significantly overlap with that of an investigator who believes in the whole Bible, but their aims are different, just as similar technological procedures may be used for very different ends. Also problematic is the fact that “critical” = “higher-critical” employs its tools to go beyond solid biblical evidence.

Therefore, rather than attempting to convert and baptize the term critical, which is inevitably problematic or at least misleading, it is best to seek another label for our exegetical approach. Some have suggested alternatives to “historical-critical method” such as “historical-grammatical method,” but the emphasis of this hermeneutical label seems to be narrower than the comprehensive range of disciplines, contexts, and backgrounds (including archaeology) relevant to the highest-quality wholistic exegesis. “Historical-contextual method” or “wholistic [or “comprehensive”] historical method” would appear more fitting.

Attempts to alter the Bible’s message and authority by treating it as merely human through higher-critical literary approaches, briefly described here, are well known. But their close relationships to some other currently popular manifestations of what could more broadly be called “higher-critical thinking”—such as political correctness or science over the Bible—are less explored.

To be concluded in the next online edition of Perspective Digest.

Roy Gane, Ph.D., is Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Languages at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
2. See further in Roy Gane, Leviticus, Numbers (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan,
2004), especially on Leviticus 17, Contemporary Significance section.

Back to top
Many church members are bewildered by the multiplicity of Christian styles of worship. Usually, when believers are talking about these feelings, the conversation ends when someone asserts that the reasons for disliking a form of worship are cultural. Culture shapes taste.

Thus, the reasoning follows, if the new style is accepted, with time it will become liked. Are worship styles¹ a matter of taste or a matter of principle? Is corporate taste a reliable principle to shape our corporate worship style? Are there principles that can be used to help shape worship and to choose what to include in it?

Many believers have worshiped God since their early youth. When they worship, experience precedes thinking. They relate to the Sabbath in the same way. They experience it without giving it much thought. They just do it.

Why should worshipers reflect on what they experience? Because Jesus personally prayed to the Father that they “may be made perfect in one” (John 17:23, KJV), as He and the Father are one (vs. 22). Thus, when the worship style becomes divisive, there is need for some reflection on some of the explicit and implicit reasons for what is done. All need to think and pray about this situation, which dishonors God.

Many Adventists understand worship as what they do on Sabbath during the sermon hour. The conviction is spreading, however, that modes of worship are cultural. To say that worship styles are cultural implies that any cultural form may be used that is accepted by contemporary society. Worship, some think, is about self-expression. Therefore, anything one chooses to do to express oneself in worship is acceptable before the Lord.

When divine worship is addressed in this context, it is bound to generate animated disagreement and very little real communication. Worship is understood on a cultural/individualistic basis. Yet, at least in theory, everyone will deny that everything is acceptable before the Lord. When no clear parameters are used to evaluate cultural forms, it is impossible to avoid this conclusion in practical life. Obviously, human culture provides no permanent parameters to evaluate cultural forms.

The role of culture in ritual formation should not be addressed without a clear idea about the permanent principles that should guide the rituals in corporate worship. There are some permanent guiding principles of biblical worship that should unite Adventist worship around the world and help to evaluate the cultural process of ritual formation and worshiping practice:
Scripture, Culture, Worship, and Liturgy

Believers arrive at their conceptions of worship in different ways. And Adventists frequently copy their worship styles from other Protestant denominations as if they could do no harm. The various worship styles currently available should be analyzed to decide whether each new style of liturgy is grounded on scriptural thinking. Adventists need to understand the role that culture plays in the liturgical styles that are being copied from other Christian denominations.

The Oxford Dictionary defines worship as “the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity,” and liturgy as “a form or formulary according to which public religious worship, especially Christian worship, is conducted.” In other words, while worship refers to an internal state of human consciousness, liturgy designates objective forms and rituals, external to human consciousness. In short, worship is an internal experience that takes place in human beings. Liturgy consists of the external forms and rituals believers use in their worship ceremonies.

From this distinction, it follows that much of the discussion about worship in Adventism is a quarrel over liturgy and rituals. Confusing worship with liturgy obscures the deep spiritual issue of worshiping God. Worship should not be equated with liturgy and rituals. Instead, worship should be understood for what it is and how it connects to the formalities of liturgy.

Participants in church rituals usually think more about how the rituals make them feel than about how they originated. Subjective personal enjoyment and pastoral success in attracting believers to worship services, however, are not reliable criteria to judge the appropriateness of rituals in public worship. Adventists may be inclined to assume they draw their rituals from Scripture. Clearly, baptism and Holy Communion originate in Scripture. Yet, other things Adventists do in public worship, such as the hymns they sing, cannot be traced to a biblical text. Thus, culture plays a role in liturgical formation. How can worshipers know, then, if the liturgical forms copied from evangelical denominations are compatible with biblical worship? An answer to this question necessitates a consideration of what any liturgical style assumes.

To simplify the explanation of a complex matter, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conditions of Worship and Liturgy
To describe this diagram from the viewpoint of life experience (historical order) is to begin from the right and move to the left. The diagram’s headers present interlinked levels of reality. They are: (5) liturgy, (4) worship, (3) life, (2) theory, and (1) the foundation. The liturgical level (5) includes, for instance, styles, rituals, and music. The worship level (4) refers to the inner attitude of the mind and its openness to God. The life level (3) antecedes the worship level in the sense that experiences of the Christian life are conditions to the worship experience and help to shape liturgical forms. Yet, the theory level (2), where the understanding of theology and salvation takes place, logically precedes and helps to shape the levels of life, worship, and liturgy. Finally, the foundation level (1) is the base on which the other four levels stand. If we consider the same components in their logical order (causal order) we have to begin from the left and move to the right. Thus, the foundation (1) causes theological understanding (2), that in turn, influences life experience (3), which goes on to elicit worship (4), and shape liturgical styles (5).

Ellen White makes the connections drawn in this diagram when explaining Satan’s ways of deception: “Satan is constantly seeking to divert the attention of the people from the Bible” [foundation level].

“It is Satan’s constant effort to misrepresent the character of God, the nature of sin, and the real issues at stake in the great controversy. His sophistry lessens the obligation of the divine law and gives men license to sin. At the same time he causes them to cherish false conceptions of God [theory level] so that they regard Him with fear and hate rather than with love [life level]. The cruelty inherent in his own character is attributed to the Creator; it is embodied in systems of religion and expressed in modes of worship [worship level]. Thus the minds of men are blinded, and Satan secures them as his agents to war against God. By perverted conceptions of the divine attributes, heathen nations were led to believe human sacrifices necessary to secure the favor of Deity; and horrible cruelties have been perpetrated under the various forms of idolatry [liturgy level].”

Historically, liturgy is known by its activity. As we experience rituals, they become part of who we are. We belong to the liturgy, and the liturgy belongs to us. With repetition, liturgy becomes second nature. This explains why many find it difficult to analyze rationally or explain with words their views about liturgy. Matters of liturgy can become very emotional and sensitive. The historical level...
in which liturgy is experienced cannot be ignored. Because external forms of liturgy appeal to sensory perception, there is always the risk of confusing them with worship.

When disagreement about liturgical styles arises in the church, its emotional nature should not be overlooked, and an effort must be made to reflect on its causes. Worshipers should distance themselves from their emotional experience and attempt the difficult task of understanding the causes of liturgical styles.

This should begin with the consideration of the foundation of theological beliefs and religious experiences. As we see in Figure 1, God’s revelation is the foundation. Revelation, however, requires human appropriation. Christians have appropriated divine revelation in two main ways. Classical and modern Christianity believe that, primarily, human culture reveals or points to God. Seventh-day Adventism believes that God reveals Himself in Scripture as He personally interacts historically within human culture.

These disparate convictions become the foundation from which theological understanding, life experiences, worship, and liturgical styles flow. They create two different and conflicting views of theology, salvation, Christian experience, worship, and liturgical styles. In other words, liturgical styles in Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations are closely dependent on the way they understand the revelation-inspiration of Scripture, theology, salvation, the Christian life, and worship. For this reason, it is not safe to uncritically borrow liturgical styles from evangelical denominations. To do so would be to risk acceptance of culturally based rituals and make the church vulnerable to the theological system to which they belong.

When believers assume changing culture as the foundation of divine revelation—philosophy, science, and tradition—they place salvation outside human history. This theological assumption disconnects God and salvation from history and culture.

God effects salvation on the timeless non-historical level of the human soul. God does not save on the historical/cultural level but on the higher level of non-historical spirituality. Protestants call it justification by faith or “the gospel”; Roman Catholics call it sacraments.

Liturgy, then, can be seen as belonging to the realm of history and culture where God does not intervene. This being the case, believers feel free to use cultural forms to worship their conceptions of God. This uncritical use of culture fits well with the use of culture as the foundation of theology and life experiences. Yet, as culture changes, Catholic and Protestant denominations are compelled to adapt their theologies and liturgical styles to changing social conventions. Thus, cultural-originated rituals and pluralism in liturgical styles are believed to fit with the timeless/spiritual nature of divine activity and the gospel experience of salvation.

Seventh-day Adventist believers, however, should not adopt liturgical forms based on culture as Roman Catholic and Protestants do because Adventists found their theology and life on Scripture, not on culture. When believers assume Scripture as foundational to God’s revelation of Himself—the sola, tota, prima scriptura principle—they find the transcendent and immutable God personally providing salvation within the historical flow of human history.
Since the fall of Adam and Eve, the same God continues to be the center of all histories. As Adventist theology originates directly from His revelation through the prophets, cultural changes do not require changes in theology, life experiences, worship, or liturgical styles. Only new revelation from God could bring changes in the Christian life, worship, and liturgical styles.

Believers committed to biblical teachings, then, should make cultural or artistic forms of Christian liturgy fit the overall teachings of the Bible, especially its teachings about salvation and the new life in Christ. Specific principles about liturgy should also fit the overall theological and experiential contexts based on the *sola scriptura* principle.

There are, then, conflicting ways to incorporate cultural elements in Christian liturgies and rituals. One way, grounded in culture, adopted mainly by Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations, uses only non-permanent cultural guidelines—philosophy and science—to determine the inclusion of current cultural customs in their liturgies. Another way, grounded on biblical revelation, adopted by Seventh-day Adventism and some biblically based evangelical congregations, use only permanent biblical guidelines to determine the inclusion of current cultural customs in church liturgies.

**Scriptural Principles of Worship**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a principle is "a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning." Simply put, a principle is a guide that helps us understand life. There are biblical principles that may help us personally and as a community to experience true Christian worship and to express it using compatible cultural forms in our liturgy.

**Principles of Personal Worship.** Some general principles can help to understand the nature of personal worship. There are also principles of congregational worship. Both are reliable criteria that Adventists may use to identify, evaluate, and modify cultural forms to make them compatible with Scripture and acceptable to God.

- **Principle of Origin: God the Creator.** The cause of worship is God—His nature, actions, and initiatives. That worship is about God. It is not about us or our cultural preferences. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, biblical authors clearly teach this principle. Twenty-five centuries ago, God told Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt to worship Him (Ex. 3:12). At the end of Scripture, an angel of God tells John to worship only God (Rev. 22:8, 9). According to Jesus, this principle is universal; all the angels (Heb. 1:6) and even Satan (Matt. 4:16) must worship God.

  “The true ground of divine worship, not of that on the seventh day merely, but of all worship, is found in the *distinction between the Creator and his creatures*. This great fact can never become obsolete, and must never be forgotten.”

  This distinction is huge. It declares that God’s reality goes beyond the greatness of His exalted throne in heaven. Theologians call it “divine transcendence.” This means that God is great, beyond our understanding (Job 36:26). Not even the highest heaven can contain Him (2 Chron. 6:18).
This can help to explain why the second commandment says not to make any image of God (Ex. 20:4). God the Creator is beyond images. To make an image of God is to limit Him in form to that of one of His creatures. The greatness and transcendence of God the Creator elicits worship and requires befitting liturgical forms.

From Moses' and John’s statements above, it can be seen that worship is a human action directed to God. Interestingly, neither the Hebrew nor the Greek languages have a specific word for worship as we do in English. Addressing Moses, God used the Hebrew word 'abad, which means “to serve,” “to work,” “to be a slave,” or “to worship.” Addressing John, the angel used the Greek word proskunéw, which means, “to bow down.” According to these words, worship includes human submission and service to God. Submission points to the inner spiritual nature of worship. Service describes its external expression as lifestyle.

If worship is a relation of submission and service to God, the way God is understood (theology) determines worship and liturgy. This link between theology and worship fits the presuppositions of worship described in Figure 1 above. The less that is known of the God of Scripture, the more likely culture will shape worship and liturgy. The statement quoted above masterfully underlines God the Creator as the biblical origin and referent of worship and liturgy.

Seventh-day Adventists worship the Creator. In doing so, their worship departs from most organized religions that accept deep-time evolutionary ideas. According to the message of the first angel in Revelation 14, God’s visible end-time church will worship the Creator and proclaim this message to the world (Rev. 14:7). As Adventist understanding of God differs, so does our Christian life, worship, and choice of liturgical forms.

Christian believers worship God in Christ. Christ is the Creator (John 1:1-3) incarnated in human nature (vs. 14). Yet, many believers forget the otherness and greatness of Christ as Creator and assume that in worship they relate to a human friend. This view promotes a wrong sense of familiarity that leads to informality, casualness, and worship as entertainment.

We need to broaden and deepen our idea about who God is beyond His incarnation in Jesus Christ. The Bible will help to do that. As ideas of God expand through Bible study and the work of the Holy Spirit, worship experience and liturgical forms will conform to the transcendence and otherness of God. In approaching the presence of the infinite and mysterious Creator, a sense of awe and reverence will fill our hearts and houses of worship.

- **Principle of Existence: Discipleship as Necessary Condition.** Though God is the cause of worship, human response is the necessary condition of its existence. Without human response, there is no worship. Human response, then, belongs to the relational essence of worship. The nature of human response in worship is implicit in the words submission and service. Thus, only true disciples worship God. Thousands of professed Christians can participate in religious ceremonies, but only Christ’s disciples can offer Him truly acceptable worship.

How do sinners become disciples? Baptism (a worship ritual) does not change sinners into disciples. “The condition and evidence of our discipleship is self-denial and the cross. Unless these
are brought into our experience, we cannot know God; we cannot worship him in spirit and in truth and in the beauty of holiness.”

Jesus taught that if we continue in His way, we are truly His disciples (John 8:31). We become disciples, then, when by studying Scripture we understand Jesus’ lifestyle and freely follow Him, leaving behind the lifestyle of the old self (Eph. 4:22) and of the world (Gal. 6:14). Self-denial that is central to Christ’s incarnation and life makes possible discipleship (service to Christ). According to Paul, this is the only rational (coherent) way to worship God (Rom. 12:1). Without discipleship, private and corporate worship rituals are external forms voided of power, meaning, and coherence.

● Principle of Nature: Spirit and Truth. When Jesus told a Samaritan woman that “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24, NRSV), He defined the nature of worship. Commenting on this passage, Ellen White pointed out that Christ was “showing that the ritual service was passing away, and possessed no virtue. . . . True circumcision is the worship of Christ in spirit and truth, not in forms and ceremonies, with hypocritical pretense.” Consequently, believers need to realize that worship does not consist of performing external rituals (liturgy), but in experiencing inner spiritual surrender to God’s truth.

If worship is a matter of the heart (mind, will, and emotions), sinful human beings need a constant renewal of the content and pattern of their thoughts. Knowing that inner thoughts corrupt humanity (Gen. 6:5; Matt. 15:18), Paul realized that worshipers must not only avoid adopting the thinking of the world, but they must also seek to adopt Christ’s thought patterns (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 10:5). As Christ transforms the thoughts of men and women into His likeness, they become ready to worship Him in spirit and truth.

If our thoughts must not conform to the world, how can we pretend that God will accept liturgical forms that conform to the world’s way of thinking and acting? Adventist liturgical forms must be compatible with the spiritual nature of worship and fit Christ’s thoughts and truth. Yet, believers must not forget that liturgy is only the external vehicle of worship. Even if they dare to enact rituals ordained by God in Scripture formally, without spirit and truth, they are not worshiping but offending God (Isa. 1:11-14).

● Principle of Enjoyment: Meeting a Friend. Worship must be a pleasant occasion—not because the liturgical style is attractive to personal taste, but because Christ is encountered. Christ is met in His Word. If worship is pleasant only when music, drama, decorations, and ceremonies appeal to personal or cultural taste, it may not truly be worship, but a seeking for entertainment or for the performance of an external work. One must become a disciple of Christ to fulfill the necessary condition of worship.

“When they worship Him, He expects to be with them, to bless and comfort them, filling their hearts with joy and love. The Lord desires His children to take comfort in His service and to find more pleasure than hardship in His work. He desires that those who come to worship Him shall carry away with them precious thoughts of His care and love, that they may be cheered in all the employments of daily life, that they may have grace to deal honestly and faithfully in all things.” Doubtless, then,
the enjoyment of worship embraces much more than rituals and ceremonies. 

Although music, ceremonies, rituals, and social interaction have a rightful place in church services, they are not inherent to the nature of Christian worship. Many people have difficulty understanding that the joy of worship generates from following Christ daily, not from the liturgy. Worship takes place as a life experience of discipleship. In congregational worship, believers express the joy that daily communion with God and service to Him generates in their lives. The disciple brings joy to the worship service to share with God and fellow believers. Joy of worship is not generated by the mere attractiveness of liturgy. 

The notion that joy originates in liturgy corrupts the worship experience. Liturgy operates on the senses, not on the spirit where worship takes place. In the 21st century, liturgy appeals to the senses by accommodating characteristics of the entertainment industry. By adapting liturgical forms of the world, Christians disregard the Bible as the foundation of worship (see Figure 1), its principles of worship, and the essence of Christianity. 

This procedure is not new. Ellen White vividly describes the results of this approach to liturgy in Ahab’s time: “Captivated by the gorgeous display and the fascinating rites of idol worship, the people followed the example of the king and his court, and gave themselves up to the intoxicating, degrading pleasures of a sensual worship. In their blind folly they chose to reject God and His worship. The light so graciously given them had become darkness. The fine gold had become dim.”

**Principles of Congregational Worship.**

For many Adventists, worship boils down to the Saturday morning sermon. What should they do when they meet together to worship God? Answers to this question require some principles of congregational worship. Congregational principles assume, expand, and affirm the general principles discussed above.

- **Principle of Existence: Divine Presence.** Is it possible to go to church without worshiping God? Can church attendance be equated with worship? What does it take for a congregation to worship God? According to the general principles of origin and existence, worship originates in God’s creation and exists in human discipleship. Thus, acknowledging God as Creator and embracing the concept of discipleship are preconditions of congregational worship. Disciples come to worship the Creator. Yet, what should take place for congregational worship to exist? 

  Congregational worship responds to God’s presence. Without divine presence, worship does not exist. It is only meeting, singing, and relating to one another. How do believers experience the presence of God in congregational worship?

  “Although God dwells not in temples made with hands, yet He honors with His presence the assemblies of His people. He has promised that when they come together to seek Him, to acknowledge their sins, and to pray for one another, He will meet with them by His Spirit.” However, according to Christ, we do not see or feel the Holy Spirit (John 3:7, 8). How, then, can we experience the presence of Christ?"
The way in which Christians understand God’s presence through the Holy Spirit varies widely. Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants believe that Christ is present in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Charismatic Christians think they experience the presence of Christ in the baptism of the Holy Spirit—generally manifested in connection with loud music, the gift of tongues, and preaching. Biblical Christians believe Christ becomes present when His Word is proclaimed. "God’s Spirit is in his word, and a special blessing will be received by those who accept the words of God when illuminated to their mind by the Holy Spirit. It is thus that the believer eats of Christ, the Bread of Life. Truth is seen in a new light, and the soul rejoices as in the visible presence of Christ."13

"When we bow in prayer, let us remember that Jesus is with us. When we go into the house of God, let us remember that we are not going into the place of worship alone. We bring Jesus with us. If the people of God could have a realizing sense of this fact, they would not be inattentive hearers of the word. There would not be a cold lethargy upon hearts, so that those who profess his name cannot speak of his love."14

Congregational worship exists because of the proclamation, explanation, and application of God’s words to the concrete life of believers. For this reason, the sermon, personal testimonies, and biblical lyrics (spiritual songs?) become the essential sensory/spiritual component of worship. Yet proclamation of the Word in itself is not worship. Worship is the invisible and free movement of the mind/life of individual believers who respond to God’s Word in deep and complete commitment to Him.

When public worship takes place, God the Creator makes Himself present in Christ through the Word and the Holy Spirit, and in response, disciples offer a renewed commitment of faith, spiritual songs, praise, thanksgiving, and devotion. “When our hearts are tuned to praise our Maker, not only in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, but also in our lives, we shall live in communion with Heaven. Our offering of grateful thanks will not be spasmodic, or reserved for special occasions; there will be gratitude in the heart and in the home, in private as well as in public devotion. This constitutes the true worship of God.”15

- Principle of Attraction: The Resurrected Christ. Why go to church on Saturdays? Is it the music? To meet friends? Good preaching? The air-conditioning and architectural style of the building? Its convenient location or time? Attending church for these or similar reasons may not be worshiping God.

God designed that in worship, Christ should be the real, living, active center of attraction. Christ promised that “‘When I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all men to myself’” (John 12:32, NIV). “Christ purposed that his cross should become the center of attraction, whereby he should draw the hearts of men to himself.”16 “The Father came in vital connection with the world through his well-beloved Son, and the revelation of divine truth through the Son was designed to draw men to the Father.”17

The resurrected Christ through the Holy Spirit draws all men to Himself. Not all will worship Him, not all will be saved, but all will be attracted by Christ to Himself. When men and women
respond to Christ’s attraction, they worship Him in Spirit and Truth.

**Principles of Liturgy**

- **Principle of Creativity: Obedience to Christ.** The principle of attraction leads to the principle of creativity and liveliness. Worship liturgy must be attractive and testify to the worshiper’s personal commitment to Christ. This requires obedient creativity in shaping attractive liturgical forms that exhort worshipers to surrender their lives to Christ and serve Him in their daily lives.

  Christ is the principle of attraction and the principle of obedient creativity and liveliness of liturgical forms. “The highest commendation we can receive as Christian workers is to say that we present Christ lifted up on the cross as the object of supreme desire; and how can we do this better than by making religion attractive? Let us show that to us the worship of God is not drudgery and dry form, but spirit and life.”18

  Obedient creativity seeks to express the worshipers’ transformation into the likeness of Christ; not their cultural differences, preferences, and habits. Therefore, the forms of worship they create should be trans-cultural rather than culturally conditioned. They should carefully avoid using forms springing from or associated with sinful practices and habits. At the same time, their liturgy should be attractive and an expression of the spiritual joy that springs from worshiping Christ.

- **Principle of Content: Distinguishing Between the Holy and Common.** Through the complex liturgical system of the Old Testament, God intended to show His holiness. Thus, people, actions, and things God chose to use in the ritual became holy, that is, consecrated for holy use.

  Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, presented “strange fire” before God (Lev. 10:1, KJV). What they probably did was to ignite their censer not with the prescribed fire of the altar but used a common—not the consecrated—source of fire. The consequences were horrific and probably unexpected. “Fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (vs. 2, NKJV). Moses explained God’s action to his brother Aaron: “This is what the Lord meant when he said, “Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified”” (vs. 3, NRSV). In this context, God expressed an important general principle of liturgy: “[You must] distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean” (vs. 10, NIV). God not only formulated this principle theoretically, but He also explained its importance and non-negotiability in real life by punishing Nadab and Abihu with death by fire.

  This principle specifically relates to congregational worship, but should it apply to Christian liturgy? Although God devised the Old Testament liturgical system to be used until Christ’s death (Mark 15:38; Matt. 27:51; 2 Cor. 3:11), He continues to be holy and desires to show Himself holy to those who approach Him. Moreover, because God’s nature and His plan of salvation are immutable (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17; Heb. 6:13-18; 13:8), this principle applies to Christian worship. Consequently, what is common and ordinary should not be used before Him. Christian worship should not employ anything clearly associated with the world or our past sinful life (c.f., Deut. 12:1-6).

  “No one should bring into service the power of imagination to worship that which belittles God in
the mind and associates Him with common things. Those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth. They must exercise living faith. Their worship will then be controlled not by the imagination, but by genuine faith.”19 In liturgical matters, the criterion to include cultural contents in liturgical forms should be pleasing to Him, not what appeals to the personal or cultural preferences of worshipers. Worship is about God, not about the worshiper. How can we distinguish between the holy and the common?

Worshipers need to purify their souls to avoid becoming absorbed in activities of this world. This is important because failing to differentiate between the sacred and the profane may seem of little importance to postmodern secular people, but it remains a slippery slope leading to idolatry.

“Solomon changed his place of worship to Jerusalem, but his former act in sacrificing in a place not made sacred by the presence of the Lord, but dedicated to the worship of idols, removed from the minds of the people something of the repulsion with which they should have regarded the horrible performances practiced by idolaters. This mingling of the sacred and the profane was the first step in the practice of Solomon which led him to suppose that the Lord was not so particular in regard to the worship of His people. Thus he was educating himself to make still greater departures from God and His work. Little by little his heathen wives led him to make them altars on which to sacrifice to their gods.”20

- **Principle of Suspicion.** Careful application of the principle of suspicion is necessary because in liturgy formation, creativity may spring at times from the sinful desires of disobedient hearts. More than two millennia ago, Gideon used his creativity to build an alternate place of worshiping Yahweh around a golden ephod he built with the booty taken from the Midianites (Judg. 8:26, 27). Gideon’s creativity led Israel into licentious worship. “His sin consisted in taking over the prerogatives of the Aaronic priesthood without divine sanction. This deviation from the right prepared the way for wider apostasy both in his immediate family and among the tribesmen.”21

“The course pursued by Gideon proved a snare, not only to himself and family, but to all Israel. The irregular and unauthorized worship led the people finally to forsake the Lord altogether, to serve idols. The ephod and the breastplate were regarded with pride, because of their costly material and exquisite workmanship; and after a time were looked upon with superstitious reverence. The services at the place of worship were celebrated with feasting and merriment, and at last became a scene of dissipation and licentiousness. Thus Israel were led away from God by the very man who had once overthrown their idolatry.”22

“All plans based upon human reasoning should be looked upon with a jealous eye, lest Satan insinuate himself into the position which belongs to God alone.”23 A “jealous eye” means a “suspicious eye,” a distrustful eye.

In other words, worshipers should distrust their reasoning and imagination. They should always subject their thoughts and creations to biblical criticism. Yet, how can they criticize their own thoughts and creations? They should begin by assuming that their imaginations are sinful and their opinions tainted. Then, they should test their ideas and liturgical creations by biblical principles and
doctrines, and the principles of worship as detailed earlier in this article. Finally, they should in prayer seek the advice of other Christians of proven wisdom and faithfulness to God’s Word.

- **Principle of Spiritual Effect.** In creating or selecting liturgy for congregational worship, believers should keep in mind that liturgical forms influence the human spirit. Consequently, these forms should motivate, facilitate, express, and enhance the experience of individual and congregational worship. The spiritual effect of liturgy will be determined by a full understanding of the origin, nature, and existence of worship (see above), and the presence of God. Without a biblical theological understanding of the Divine and human spirits, proper assessment of the spiritual effects of the chosen rituals will be impossible. By default, rituals may be chosen that please fallen human beings. Such liturgical forms will not motivate true Christian worship in Spirit and Truth.

As modern Christians forget that Christ is the Creator, their worship and liturgy progressively lose reverence and awe. With the explicit intention of attracting secular believers, pastors intentionally adapt their liturgical forms to contemporary cultural trends. The spiritual effect of this ecumenical liturgical approach is no longer Christian but worldly. A worldly spirit of familiarity, informality, and casualness replaces the Christian spirit of reverence and awe before the presence of God.

Christ’s incarnation does not justify a change in the spiritual effect of liturgical forms. “It is dishonoring God to speak of him as though he were on a level with finite man. We should speak with reverence the sacred name of Christ, for, although he humbled himself and became obedient to the death of the cross, yet he thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Let us take this precious name upon our lips with profound reverence. Some have allowed their feelings to control their judgment, in meetings for worship, and have indulged in words and attitudes that have not been in harmony with the solemn worship of God. We have heard men shout and jump, and pound the desk, and use vain repetition, and this they thought was worship to God. But it was not according to the direction or will of God.”24

Liturgy should always flow from and enhance the experience of worship existing in the heart of the believer. Consequently, congregational liturgical forms should be carefully evaluated for their effect on the spirit of the believer. This is very important because worship takes place as an inner attitude of the mind, will, and emotions. If what is done in church disturbs the spiritual capacity for receiving the presence of God in His Word (principles of existence and nature), it should be modified or dropped, no matter how appealing to the senses the rituals may be.

Instead, liturgical forms should inspire a sense of awe, reverence, and expectation, for the presence of God is a necessary condition of worship. In the Old Testament, God commanded, “Have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:30, NIV). Following God’s command, Paul instructed New Testament believers to offer God “an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28, NRSV, italics supplied). Reverence and awe are appropriate spiritual effects of liturgy because they prepare our spiritual capacities for receiving the presence of God in His Word.

R reverence means treating something or someone with great respect; in other words, to have
due regard for someone’s feelings, wishes, or rights. Awe is a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder. The principles of origin and existence presented above determine the principle of congregational mood. “Jehovah, the eternal, self-existent, uncreated One, Himself the Source and Sustainer of all, is alone entitled to supreme reverence and worship.”

Even before the end of the 19th century, Ellen White thought Adventist worship needed to grow in reverence. Her comments apply also to Adventists at the beginning of the 21st century. “It is too true that reverence for the house of God become almost extinct. Sacred things and places are not discerned; the holy and exalted are not appreciated. Is there not a cause for the want of fervent piety in our families? Is it not because the high standard of religion is left to trail in the dust? God gave rules of order, perfect and exact, to His ancient people. Has His character changed? Is He not the great and mighty God who rules in the heaven of heavens? Would it not be well for us often to read the directions given by God Himself to the Hebrews, that we who have the light of the glorious truth shining upon us may imitate their reverence for the house of God? We have abundant reason to maintain a fervent, devoted spirit in the worship of God. We have reason even to be more thoughtful and reverential in our worship than had the Jews. But an enemy has been at work to destroy our faith in the sacredness of Christian worship.”

Conclusion

Experimentation with “worship styles” has caused confusion among Adventist believers at the beginning of the 21st century. Frequently, creativity in Adventist worship styles boils down to borrowing increasingly secularized liturgical forms from evangelical congregations. Contemporary worship styles adopt cultural forms drawn from the entertainment industry. Leaders involved in this drawn-out experimentation uncritically assume that even pop cultural forms produced to express worldly and sinful sentiments are acceptable to God.

Worship is not a matter of taste or cultural preference but a state of mind and an attitude of the heart. Pastors and believers should seek to understand the clear biblical distinction between worship and liturgical styles. As pastors lead congregational worship, they should bear in mind that in our relationship with God, worship is the essential core and liturgy an external formality. Worship may exist without liturgy, but liturgy is meaningless without worship.

Consequently, personal or cultural taste and preference are not reliable principles from which to shape liturgical forms. Instead, Scripture and the Gift of Prophecy set out clear principles regarding worship and liturgical styles that Adventists should understand and use to evaluate and modify any cultural form they may want to use in their liturgy. Literally, anything common in congregational liturgy must be purified by the careful application of biblical principles of worship and liturgy formation.

Liturgical forms are contextualized to a series of interlinked principles. They assume principles of liturgy. Principles of liturgy assume principles of worship. Principles of worship assume a life of Christian discipleship. A life of Christian discipleship assumes a broad and deep understanding of
theology. And theology assumes the foundation of biblical revelation. Liturgical forms must fit perfectly within this multi-layered contextual background. This should pre-empt any attempt to assimilate liturgical forms from evangelical churches that found their theology not only on Scripture but mainly on culture and tradition.

The transcendence of God the Creator is the basis of worship (principle of origin). Discipleship is the condition required for worship (principle of existence). Spirit and truth are the realm of reality and the general content of the worshiping act (principle of nature). Worship is furthermore a pleasant occasion because in it we meet with God our Friend (principle of enjoyment).

Congregational worship springs from the presence of God the Creator in His Word through the Holy Spirit (principle of existence). Christ and His cross bring worshipers to church (principle of attraction).

Liturgical forms should be attractive and should appeal to worshipers to surrender their lives to Christ and serve Him in their daily lives (principle of creativity). In selecting activities to include in liturgy, we should be careful to distinguish between the holy and the common (principle of content). Jesus’ followers are still involved in the Great Controversy with Satan, who expresses himself through the world. We should be critical of our own judgments and choices that relate to liturgy formation (principle of suspicion). Our liturgical forms and ceremonies should help create an atmosphere of reverence and awe necessary to appreciate the presence of God in His Word, and respond to Him in worship (surrender and service) (principle of congregational spirit). Each congregation needs to understand these principles and apply them to its concrete experience of congregational worship and liturgical formation.

Participation in liturgical forms and ceremonies is not worship. True worship can exist without congregational liturgy. Worship is necessary for salvation; liturgy is not. Those who reduce their religious experience to the external forms of worship will not be saved. For them, liturgy becomes legalism and even a form of justification by works. Churchgoers should keep in mind that God desires “steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6, NRSV).

Fernando Canale, Ph.D., is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. Here I use the generalized misnomer “worship styles.” The correct designation for congregational activity styles is "liturgy." The distinction between worship and liturgy follows.
3. Ibid., s.v., "liturgy."
5. The Great Controversy, p. 569.
7. Ibid., p. 438, italics supplied.
12. Ibid., p. 50.
14. Ibid., April 18, 1892, par. 10.
15. __________, *The Youth’s Instructor* (December, 31, 1896).
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. (December 4, 1884).
19. __________, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1145.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid. (February 24, 1890).

Back to top
Facing the Gas Chamber

Early October 1969. I had been recently drafted into the U.S. Army, one of the countless thousands of young Americans called upon for compulsory service during the Vietnam conflict. My college deferments were spent, and my number was up.

After processing in at Fort Lewis, Washington, I was shipped to Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio, Texas, for six weeks of basic training. Each draftee received a copy of the syllabus for basic training, *The Soldier's BCT [Basic Combat Training] Handbook*, a 264-page paperbound manual that we were instructed to commit to memory—and that is still in my library. Sample sections: “Quick Kill Training,” “Counter Signs and Parole Words,” “Determining Azimuths Between Points on the Map,” that sort of thing. Appendix D, on page 228, addressed “Chain of Command.” It contained a blank page to write in the names of all those under whom I directly served and whom I was to salute. In basic training, you salute just about everything that moves, just to be safe. At the top of that chain of command was the U.S. President, where we penciled in “Richard Nixon.”

The process of basic training is to prepare for a variety of tests, some of them physical, some of them mental, some of them seemingly *experi*-mental. One of these tests was to become familiar with, and prepare for, the effects of chemical warfare. For us, this meant exposure to tear gas and how to react to it.

From the very first few days of basic training, hushed rumors of the “gas chamber” began to circulate. This was the unofficial term given to the place where, sometime during the last of the six weeks, we would be exposed to tear gas and learn how to respond to it.

The day came at last: We marched to a remote area of Fort Sam Houston, where a small clapboard bungalow sat in a clearing. The walls inside had been torn down, leaving the interior of the house as a single room. All the windows had been boarded up, completely sealed. There were two
doors: one at the front to enter, the other at the back to exit. Here we were to learn of the effects of tear gas and how to use our gas masks to protect ourselves.

The requirement: Enter the house in groups of six with gas masks on, jog for five minutes in a circle surrounding a sergeant who is wearing a gas mask, until all have worked up a sweat in the tropical, southern Texas climate. Then, when the sergeant points one by one to each individual, the “trainee” has to tear off his gas mask and choke out his full name, rank, and serial number before the sergeant signals permission to exit the gas chamber. (Other sergeants wearing gas masks are stationed at the doors to prevent anyone from bolting before successfully passing the test.)

We quickly learned that this was one of those unusual tests in which it’s best to be first. Otherwise, you are standing in ranks outside the gas chamber, waiting the turn for you and five others to enter, and watching earlier individuals emerge from the test, crimson-faced and perspiring, coughing and retching. The test is truly both physical and emotional. It has begun even before you enter the house.

Throughout Scripture are examples of ways in which God allowed people to be tested physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sometimes these tests were self-inflicted; they resulted from poor choices and downright human sinfulness. But some were initiated by God for reasons that will be fully explained only in eternity. It isn’t that God is capricious or sadistic. But He does know what’s best for us, and sometimes a test is administered for that very reason.

Consider the incident in which God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac. This certainly must be among the most compelling stories in the Old Testament. The King James Version begins the account in this way: “It came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am” (Gen. 22:1).

This verse has led to significant comment and misunderstanding. How could a loving God tempt someone to do something wrong? And how could Scripture contradict itself in such an obvious way. After all, it says elsewhere that God does not tempt anyone (James 1:13).

This is one of the places in which it pays to compare other translations of Scripture. The NRSV, the NIV, the NLT, the NASB, and the NKJV—all translate Genesis 22:1 to say, “God tested” Abraham.

Big difference.

I can say with certainty that I would never have been tempted by anyone to experience the gas chamber. For most reasonable thinkers, its negative effects are surely obvious. It is not a rational choice. It isn’t something that someone would normally do “just for fun.”

But I was ordered to walk into that gas chamber. It was my decision, then, to decide whether I trusted the person who was giving me that order. If I were truly motivated to be as prepared as possible to serve in combat, I would decide, reasonably, I think, to be tested to experience the gas chamber with the guidance of someone I had learned to trust, someone who assured me that I could succeed, and that it was in my best interest.

A test—a very unpleasant and uncomfortable experience—was necessary. In the spiritual realm, 19th-century minister and author George MacDonald described God’s tests of us in his
characteristically direct language: “We are so full of ourselves, and feel so grand, that we should never come to know what poor creatures we are, never begin to do better, but for the knock-down blows that the loving God gives us. We do not like them, but he does not spare us for that.”

Something of this thinking must certainly have been in Abraham’s mind as he set out on the agonizing three-day journey to Mount Moriah. And it surely must have been what motivated him to raise the knife over his son and heir.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, however, helps to understand how Abraham could have been willing to do this: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead” (Heb. 11:17-19, NKJV, italics supplied).

Abraham was tested, not tempted. His Mount Moriah experience was prompted by God’s test, not by Satan’s temptation. And Abraham’s response was prompted by his utter belief in God’s power to raise Isaac, whether that was to be in an immediate, or in the ultimate, resurrection. He “concluded that God could and would resurrect Isaac. He had learned from Isaac’s birth that God could bring life out from death.”

But this in no way minimizes the difficulty of the test. Raising his knife in the air over the living, breathing, corporeal life of his willing son—and only true heir—was an act of faith that we can only pray for daily.

REFERENCES
When Meaning Fades Away

It seems as if no other question is asked more frequently than “Why?” We all know the insistent and inquisitive “Why” of a 3-year-old child. With passing time it takes on a nagging, whining, and complaining connotation with a 9 year old and turns into a haughty, challenging, and even rebellious question with teenagers.

And when one faces pain, sickness, suffering, and death, the question “Why” quickly turns into a challenge that torments our minds and souls. It challenges our faith in God and even has the potential to destroy our faith. To experience suffering is painful enough. To suffer without meaning is almost unbearable. For many the temptation is to construct rather hastily some kind of coherent meaning out of our suffering. But to trust God, even if we don’t see any meaning, is the challenge we all face as believers.

If we are honest, we all have grappled with this painful, nagging, challenging, and even rebellious “Why” in our own minds: Why, God, did this happen to me? Why, God, are my plans and hopes frustrated? Why, God, am I the one who is always disappointed in life? Why, God, did You not help me in my helpless situation? Why, God, did You treat me like this?

When trouble, disappointment, and suffering sandblast us to the core, the true stuff of who we are and what is important to us will come to the surface. Actually for Christians, who believe in God, there are deep, more foundational questions: Is God good? Can God be trusted?

Our view of God and His character is the truth around which revolve all answers to the issue of suffering and pain. Do we really believe that God is good, nothing but good, through and through, completely, entirely, 100 percent, from beginning to end? Or do we share what many people believe: God is good. He is very good, they think. In fact, He is very good very often—but not always! In crucial moments of crisis, when our faith in God is put to a test, we can’t really trust Him. We are not absolutely sure. And if we are not sure, why should we trust God in this situation? We always need to
know first exactly why God did things and why He allowed things to happen. Only then are we willing to trust Him.

But if we know for sure that God is good and He does not make any mistake, then we can extend our trust in Him, even though we might not understand everything. Our trust in God is not blind. We trust Him for good reasons. Therefore we can say: “God, I do not understand why this happened in this situation. I don’t know why You allowed this to take place. But I do know why I trust You anyway. I believe that You know, even if I do not know. I do not know why it happened, but I trust You, who knows the why!”

The question “Why?” surfaces in the Bible. In the little Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament, we find the “Why?” question raised by the prophet with an intensity and rigor that amazes the reader. He begins the book with these questions: “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ Yet You do not save. Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises” (Hab. 1:2, 3, NASB).*

These are significant and honest questions. It is encouraging to see that Habakkuk dares to raise such questions with God. If he approaches God with difficult questions, we do not need to be afraid to bring our questions to God, either. God is not offended by our honest, legitimate questions. He is not put off by our lack of understanding. Instead, He deals graciously with us.

The amazing thing is that God responds to Habakkuk. In fact, He gives Habakkuk not only one answer, but two. The first partial answer deals with Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. The Chaldeans were cruel and had committed outrageous atrocities. They misused their sheer unlimited power. God assures Habakkuk that in the end, even the Babylonians have to give account before God for what they did and that they are not excused from God’s judgment (2:5, 6, 8, 16, 17). But the deeper question that is at stake here, and where God provides an unexpected answer, does not aim at the external circumstances in which we live. The profound question that God is interested in has to do with His person and character. It deals with God’s nature and His plan for us in this world.

Often, when life goes well, we fancy ourselves to be the main object that is important. We easily tend to think that God loves us in order to bless us, to make our life rich and glad. We believe that it is our happiness, our honor, our fame, our future, our well-being that is at stake—and that our relationship with Him is secondary. From our natural perspective, we are the center of things, and God is there to make us happy. When we talk of God the Almighty, we often think of His unlimited power as solely serving our interest. This idea of God is false through and through. It elevates us to the level of God and degrades God to be our servant. And this is nothing less than idolatry.

The nature of biblical faith, however, is to give God the honor and glory and to place our lives as much as possible into His service. Therefore, the answers that we seek to our questions should not revolve around ourselves. It is God who is at the center of the controversy between good and evil. With this in mind, we begin to understand that God does not measure and decide things solely according to our desires and wishes but that greater things are at risk in the fight between light and
darkness than what we sometimes perceive and experience.

From Habakkuk we can learn that in the end, God will be recognized as sovereign, just, and good, despite all the ups and downs in this world, despite the injustice and the confusion that apparently reigns. God has not forgotten and forsaken us. He is still in control. His promise stands firm: He will redeem His people and eventually will eradicate all evil.

This perspective prevails only by faith. It not without reason that God’s profound answer to Habakkuk’s question states: “The righteous will live by his faith” (2:4).

This statement is quoted by the apostle Paul no fewer than three times in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). In Hebrews, we find the reason that we need not throw away our confidence in God. There is a great reward (Heb. 10:35). “For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay” (vs. 37).

God has given His word. We can count on it. Until it will come to pass, we need to wait with endurance (10:36), and we should confidently live by faith! Faith is put to a test precisely when we do not see some things (11:1).

It is this confident attitude that arises through faith in God that propelled Habakkuk to close his little book with the following words: “Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places” (Hab. 3:17-19).

Habakkuk’s attitude toward God was not dependent upon external circumstances. It grew out of a deep trust in the goodness of God—who keeps His promises—and kept Habakkuk in His gracious hands. Even though we do not understand everything that God is doing, we can know for sure that God is wise and full of love. In a world that is clouded by the darkness of sin, this knowledge gives us confidence and hope that lifts us higher than any questions that might arise.

*Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this column are quoted from The New American Standard Bible.*

Back to top
The Ten Commandments and the Character of God

Each semester in my Christian Ethics class, I have a unit on the Ten Commandments. I used to assign a reaction paper in which each student would write on how Ellen White’s exposition of the Decalogue affected his or her understanding of any two out of the final six commandments. The results were predictable yet frustrating: The vast majority of students used Ellen White’s comments to conjure up a near-infinite number of ways a given commandment could be broken, would plead guilty to breaking the command in multiple manners, and then conclude that the commandments were impossible to keep. My assignment seemed to drive students to conclude that the Ten Commandments cannot be properly kept!

This was not the result I wanted.

The student responses exemplify how many Christians approach the Ten Commandments. I call this approach the Rule-Compliance (RC) model. RC practitioners see the Decalogue as a catalog of rules to be complied with or violated. The Ten Commandments are thus viewed as rules to protect one from evils that need to be avoided. Thus, how we keep the commandments is usually expressed in terms of things not to be done. We keep the eighth commandment by not taking things that are not ours. Minimal attention is paid to doing positive good.

Such an approach to the Ten Commandments seems less than compatible with the enthusiasm for the law expressed by David: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97, ESV, italics supplied).¹ Why should I want to meditate day and night on what I ought not to do? How is it, then, that David could rise above the RC model to find actual delight in God’s law? How can we find a more positive view of the law without undermining its moral content and its fundamental rules?

I would like to propose that the Ten Commandments are vital tools given by God to teach us how to reflect His character in our lives. Ellen White frequently asserts that the law of God is a transcript of His character. (I got 139 hits in searching for this phraseology on the Ellen White
CD-ROM, 2007 edition.) She states: “Christ came to our world to represent the character of God as it is represented in His holy law; for His law is a transcript of His character. Christ was both the law and the gospel.” When I press most people as to what this means, I get very vacuous answers.

How, then, is the Law a transcript of God’s character? I suggest that instead of viewing the Ten Commandments merely as a collection of rules that can be complied with or broken, that we need to expand our vision. I call this approach the Personal-Power (PP) model.

Let us use the eighth commandment to articulate the PP paradigm. “Thou shalt not steal.” This commandment does not address a group of people. Instead, it addresses the individual hearer or reader. Thus, when I read it, it addresses me: I am not to steal. This injunction does not address me as the potential victim of stealing. Rather, I am addressed as a potential perpetrator, one who has the power to steal (or lie, murder, etc.). Each of the commandments addresses me as the potential perpetrator and is thus designed to protect others from my power to violate their God-given rights.

The commandment to refrain from stealing implies that God has granted rights to those around me in reference to property ownership, and it reminds me that I have the power to deny them those rights in an attempt to benefit myself at their expense. So we can deduce a basic right to legitimate property ownership being protected here. But I would go further. Property rights imply that the property owners have the right not to have their property taken from them without their consent and without fair and agreed-upon compensation.

Suppose I go to the store and make a $5 purchase. I hand the clerk $10, expecting $5 in change. But the clerk is tired and somehow thinks I gave her $20, so she offers me $15 in change. I now have the power to make a $10 gain and get away with it. By the time she figures out her register is short $10, I will be long gone and forgotten. I can get away with this act without arousing suspicion.

The eighth commandment calls me to restrain myself and to exercise my power to protect the rights of the cashier and store, even though I can exploit them without their detecting it. Ten Commandment morality thus centers on how I use my power when I can get away with something. It calls me to voluntarily self-restrict the use of my power to protect the God-given rights possessed by others. Thinking about how I need to restrain my use of power to protect others’ God-given rights is something I can meditate on day and night and is an exercise I can delight in! There are always new nuances as to how I am to self-restrain my use of power into unselfish expressions. But what does this have to do with the character of God?

In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul depicts Christ as being fully God, yet who voluntarily relinquished the exercise of His rights and powers as God. He “emptied himself” (vs. 7, NRSV) of His divine privileges to function as a servant and to die on the cross. Michael Gorman rightly argues that the logic of the passage is that Christ emptied Himself because He is God. God is self-sacrificial, self-emptying in character, and for Paul the incarnation of Christ and His death on the cross proved this.

Paul takes this principle that Christ self-emptied because He is God and applies the same logic to the Corinthians over food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8-10). Because those who are “strong” see no
problem with eating, they are called to self-restrict and voluntarily refrain from eating in order to avoid causing the weaker brother to stumble. In the middle of this application of the emptying principle, Paul presents himself as an exemplar of this ethical ethos (1 Corinthians 9), using the same logical structure there as in Philippians 2.

Paul asserts that he has the right to be paid full-time for his ministerial work. But because Paul is an apostle, he chooses to make no use of his rights (1 Cor. 9:12, 15) in order not to hinder the gospel. As Paul has chosen not to exercise his power to enforce his rights to a salary, so the strong are not to use their personal power to exercise their rights in a way that damages the weaker brother.

The moral DNA of Philippians 2:5-8 and 1 Corinthians 9 is the same as the moral DNA of the Decalogue! The law indeed is a transcript of God’s character, teaching the same principle of voluntarily laying aside personal rights to bless and nurture others.

After a lively discussion of the PP model in class one day, a young man came to my office, his brow deeply furrowed, his spirit subdued yet agitated as he mulled over the meaning of the Decalogue. Haltingly, he asked several clarifying questions, followed by a long, pregnant pause as he continued thinking.

Then he quietly exclaimed, “If I take this seriously, I will have to become a different man by the time I get back to the dorm!” This opened the opportunity to introduce him to new birth in Christ as the basis for living the self-emptying life, and I saw in a new and refreshing way the truth of David’s words: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps. 19:7).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this column are quoted from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

2. Selected Messages, Book 2, p. 106.


4. Ibid.