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# Worship as the Church's Mission

by Gary Patterson

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The primary purpose of the Bible was not to propound doctrine, but inspire worship. Actually, little apologetic or doctrinal material appears in Scripture. Much of the Bible is a celebration of what God has done for his children through grace, and an invitation to worship as a response, in fellowship, to that grace.

We should not abandon apologetics and doctrinal study, only see them in perspective and recognize celebration and fellowship as central to Adventism. A doctrinal fight, instead of being the front line of the church's attack on forces of evil, becomes instead the line of last resort where the fortifications are thickest, the trenches the deepest, and desperation the highest.<sup>1</sup>

Isn't it sad that in the worship of the Creator we often come with the least joyful and creative experience of the entire week? Often it appears as if we are afraid to enjoy worship. Instead of allowing us to delight in new disclosures of God, our worship services often burden us with language and ceremonies that too often are regarded as unchangeable. Actually, they are boring. It

is often necessary for members to learn the accepted, holy language to be part of the church. Once habituated to these forms we are loath to change them. We identify God so closely with certain patterns of liturgy that we think altering the patterns imperils worship.

The fact is that many of these forms now considered sacrosanct were originally secular. Ironically, these forms come to be regarded as sacred and untouchable. But unless there is an openness to find the sacred in the secular, the opportunity to meet God is often passed by or maybe even cut off. That which "was 'without form and void' becomes a world. What was 'uncomely and not to be desired' becomes the Messiah."<sup>2</sup>

Part of the problem is that we do not properly distinguish between the sacred and the secular. We tend to regard them as polar opposites. Sometimes we even identify the sacred with the good and the secular with evil. We should not. The sacred is simply that which is set apart—in a religious setting that which is special or holy—while the secular is that which is everyday.

These distinctions do not mean that there is something evil in the ordinary. It does not seem to occur to us that the sacred and the secular go hand-in-hand. The special can only be defined and comprehended on the basis that there is an ordinary. If all we ever had was what we call "special," then it

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would be the ordinary. If it were not for the ordinary or the secular, there would be no way to recognize the special and the sacred. On the other hand, the ordinary can only be recognized when interrupted by the special.

Forcing a sharp dichotomy between the sacred and secular may cause us to devalue the ordinary and prevent moments of sacredness for setting priorities in our ordinary lives. By creating rigid forms for sacred activity we may in effect be isolating the sacred from the secular.

Since its beginning the Seventh-day Adventist Church has perceived its role as proclaiming a message. It was in the Millerite movement that we really got started. The development of our preaching worship traditions rose from this setting. To the Millerites proclamation was central. If you have a message like theirs what else is there to do? They preached at revival meetings attended by thousands. One drew such large crowds the railroad had to erect a special station north of Boston. These revivalists were not able to apprehend in a single bound all that God would have them know. Their liturgy—if it can be called a liturgy—was basically derived from the enthusiast and evangelical churches from which they came.

Ellen White rebuked their early attempts at worship.

Men of but small experience who have but little influence, can get up commonplace sermons. . . .

There is nothing in the words, or arrangements of ideas, that melts and burns its way into the heart. . . . They make bad work.<sup>3</sup>

Church meetings were often somewhat of a disaster. Recalling these times J. N. Loughborough noted that:

In our assemblies in those early times when no restraint was upon anyone—when one had just as much right to occupy the time in our public meetings as another—we were greatly annoyed by turbulent spirited men.<sup>4</sup>

A young church with free-wheeling worship services was deeply suspicious of church order and structure.

But we have moved from the dread of organized structure to one of the most tightly administered religious communions in existence today. There is a real danger that as members of an institutionalized church we will become mere spectators. Often we decry the lack of interest on the part of the laity. But what else can we expect when our architecture, our order of service, and our model for the church—preaching—encourage members to passively let the clergy do everything?

We must remember that while proclamation is essential and necessary, our purpose as Adventists can only be accomplished if worship is central, and if it is celebration involving the entire congregation. Contrary to what some think, the purpose of the church is not to build a doctrinal fortress strong enough to shut out an evil world. The purpose of the church is to be a worshipping community in the midst of the world. The purpose of the church, as one of the great protestant reformers said, is “to praise God and enjoy Him forever.”

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#### NOTE AND REFERENCES

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1. See John Killinger, *Experimental Preaching*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1973), p. 24.

2. John Killinger, *Leave it to the Spirit*. (New York:

Harper and Row, 1971), p. 153.

3. *Review and Herald*, (Jan. 5, 1869), p. 10.

4. *Review and Herald*, (July 9, 1901), p. 2.