
O Come Let Us Adore Him— But How?

by A. J. Woodfield

The influence of the liturgical movement seems to be laying hold of even Seventh-day Adventists. We refer to ourselves as “the church,” call our meeting rooms “sanctuaries,” dress our choirs in “robes,” and install stained glass windows. Particularly in larger Adventist churches, a shift is taking place from the rude informality of the meeting house with its medley of “items” to dignified churchly services, complete with introits, anthems, intercessions, responses, and even chanted psalms. How should we respond to this trend? Is it a betrayal of our heritage? Must a truly committed Adventist insist on only gospel songs, mid-week prayer meetings, and testimony sessions?

I think not. A careful look at what the Scriptures say about worship suggests that we have much further to go in appreciating the dignity appropriate for worship of the Lord of Lords. The Bible suggests worship should be like an audience with a king.

There is no lack of definitions of the term “worship” in the Oxford Dictionary—but most can be eliminated as obsolete. First, let us agree that what we are considering is the

high festival on Sabbath when the church meets to join in an act of public adoration and to hear what God has to say to it. We are not referring to the many other opportunities Adventists find for gathering—parent-teacher meetings, youth meetings, prayer and business meetings, temperance and health meetings. Let us also agree that we are defining worship as “reverence or veneration paid to a being or power regarded as supernatural or divine; the action or practice of displaying this by appropriate acts, rites, or ceremonies.”¹ In addition, let the dictionary remind us that liturgy is “a form of public worship especially in the Christian church; a collection of formularies for the conduct of the Divine Service, also public worship conducted in accordance with a prescribed form.”²

Even the most anti-liturgical Adventist congregations display their veneration of God by carefully following prescribed forms of acts, rites and ceremonies, and even worship. In the past, all Adventist churches in Britain used an identical preprinted form with the “order of service” all laid out in precise sequence; all that was lacking were the names of celebrants. Adventists lay great stress on baptism by immersion because this is the mode prescribed in the New Testament; the Lord’s Supper has to be accompanied by footwashing because of

A. J. Woodfield is chairman of the English Literature and Communication Department at Newbold College. He received his doctorate from the University of London.

Christ's command, and the communion with bread and wine is derived from the method revealed to Paul, handed on by him to the Corinthian Christians, and so to us.

The growing interest in a more elaborate, liturgical worship derives from a dissatisfaction with the pervasive lack of reverence in Adventist churches. More careful structuring of church services, the growing use of more traditional ecclesiastical terminology, and calls to worship and responses are attempts to produce a more religious atmosphere conducive to feelings of religious satisfaction. Many feel that we do not behave in church as if we were in the audience chamber of the king.

Old Testament

What may we learn from Scripture about how to approach the divine being? What was it like in the beginning? How did God's kingdom of priests worship him? How differently did their spiritual successors behave in the early years of the new dispensation?

There is no direct description of how the first man and woman conducted themselves in the presence of their creator, but we may deduce that they approached him with feelings of awe. They knew that he had created them, and creation is still an awe-inspiring concept. They also remembered how he had blessed them.³ Wherever we read of blessing, it was a rite of solemn joy, emphasizing the clear distinction between bestower and recipient: the bestowal of benefit from a superior to an inferior.⁴ Blessing did and does inspire a feeling of worship in the receiver.

After the Fall we turned to fear. The offending pair, suddenly conscious of their nakedness (and who of their descendants do not on the spiritual plane share their feelings?) "hid themselves in fear."⁵ By the time of the patriarchs, the expression of this inherited fear had crystallized into bowing

down and prostrating oneself before the Lord. Moses hid his face at the burning bush, for he was afraid to look on God.⁶ Finally, the temple liturgy exhorted worshipers: "Come let us throw ourselves at his feet in homage, let us kneel before the Lord who made us."⁷ Allusions to this submissive approach, like that of a vassal paying allegiance to his lord, are so frequent that it is obvious that this was the expected bodily approach to God.

Closely related to submissive posture was the desire to mollify the deity by bringing gifts. This desire is patent in Noah's conduct when his watery ordeal ended. His first act on leaving the ark was to erect an altar on which he could present whole offerings. The Scriptural gloss remarks that "when he (God) smelt the *soothing* odour" he resolved never to repeat the judgment of water.⁸

However, the worshiper was not free to offer anything; the deity had distinct preferences. Cain was told, "If you do well, you are accepted; if not, sin is a demon crouching at the door."⁹ While we do not know how

"So accustomed are we to the use of royal imagery that we have turned it into a dead metaphor, and until we give it life again we shall fail to behave as we should in the presence of the king of heaven."

Cain's approach was unsatisfactory, it is certain that his offering was liturgically defective. Worshipers were not to approach God in a manner of their own devising.

Further incidents and glosses seem to indicate that God also expected the use of a correct formula. There was a right name by which to address him. "At that time men began to invoke the Lord by name,"¹⁰ and the comment infers that worship previously

had been inferior. The right name ensured a better understanding of the deity worshipped; it revealed his character.

When the descendants of Abraham began their history as a nation, these inchoate but essential elements in primitive worship took on the form of a divinely revealed liturgy for the use of a kingdom of priests who were to serve a celestial king.¹¹ God adopted Israel as his subjects, and their poetry abounds in references to him as king.¹² Even when they adopted a monarchical government, their visible king was the "Lord's anointed," his deputy, his son.¹³ Joseph Angus writes:

the tabernacle (and afterwards the Temple) was considered as His palace; there He gave visible manifestations of His glory; there He revealed His will; there was offered 'the bread of the presence'; there He received His ministers, and performed His functions as Sovereign.¹⁴

So accustomed are we to the use of royal imagery that we have turned it into a dead metaphor, and until we give it life again we shall fail to behave as we should in the presence of the king of heaven.

Much of Exodus and Leviticus must be considered a sort of handbook of court etiquette, and court etiquette demands exact ceremonial performance. Petitioners to a king have to learn beforehand how to approach, how to speak, and how to retire. Royal ceremony was not designed as

"Adventists should move forward to forms of worship that prepare us for the eternal wonders of Apocalyptic liturgy. Let us worship with the priestly and royal dignity to which we, as God's own people, lay claim."

a tourist attraction. It is a symbol of the majesty of the kingdom, the dignity of its head, and is designed to inspire a proper relationship between monarch and subject. In the covenant made at Sinai, Exodus

establishes the constitution of the priestly kingdom and describes the palace to be erected as the king's audience chamber, specifies the robes to be worn by the priests and Levites, and outlines the exact duties these palace officials were to perform. Leviticus adds still further detail. These documents make it clear that the approach of priests and people to their Lord had to be careful and respectful, that the prescribed forms had to be observed most scrupulously.¹⁵

New Testament

The Old Testament scriptures describe the public worship prevalent in the time of Jesus, and the first Christians continued to share in it. They did not consider themselves members of a different society; they described themselves as the true seed of Abraham.¹⁶ They neither took nor were directed to take any steps to set up a new system of worship. "All that believed were together . . . continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home."¹⁷ Paul always worshipped with fellow Israelites in their synagogues until they drove him out. The early Christians do not seem to have intended anything other than a modification of the existing system, a removal of outmoded symbolism and its replacement with something more appropriate. Animal sacrifice was to give way to the commemoration of the true sacrifice: for type had met antitype.¹⁸ Any symbolism now was to be mainly commemorative rather than anticipatory. It was the animosity of the Jews that forced Christians into setting up their own churches. Not surprisingly, Christian churches closely resembled the synagogues, and Christian ceremonies reflected those in Judaism.

The commonest objection to liturgical worship is that it degenerates into empty formalities, and long before the coming of Jesus, spiritually-minded prophets had pro-

tested against this. Samuel told Saul that obedience was better than sacrifice; Isaiah described God's loathing of vain oblations, and Joel exhorted worshipers to rend their hearts and not their garment.²⁰ But none of them wanted to destroy the system; they attacked only its abuse. The rending of the temple veil did not proclaim the sweeping away of a reverent approach to God; it merely proclaimed that approach now was more direct.²¹ Priesthood was not abolished: a better one had taken its place. God was still king, worshipers still his subjects. Jesus replaced a strictly topical centre of worship with a universal and more spiritual one. He magnified the old system and made it honorable for all men everywhere. Nowhere does the New Testament encourage worshipers to behave casually and informally in public devotions. The epistle to the Corinthians leaves us in no doubt on this point.

The new situation is made very clear in the letter to the Hebrews. The aim of the epistle is to show the Jew that Christianity is the consummation of Judaism. It provides a better priest, a better sacrifice, a better temple, and a better absolution from sin.²² It draws a careful parallel between the old and the new, and the nature of a parallel is that both aspects of the parallel have something basic in common.²³ Type had blossomed into antitype. Ceremonial, reverent worship was to continue though sublimated to an approach that was "in spirit" and therefore valid—"in truth."

Apocalyptic

The most significant witness of the New Testament is in the Apocalypse. Here in the vision of the worship of heaven we are given the description of the reality of which Israel's system was the copy.²⁴ Naturally, therefore, the celestial sanctuary exhibits a remarkable similarity to its temple copy. Its focal point, the throne of God and his glory,

is the original of the mercy seat and the shekinah. The 24 elders, who make obeisance before it, and join in the responsive anthems and offer incense, correspond to the 24 courses of priests, each course led by its elder.²⁵ The earthly priests were robed and wore mitres because their heavenly antitypes are robed and crowned.²⁶ The sacred furnishings correspond: seven lamps burning before the throne as seven lamps burned in the holy place,²⁷ an altar of incense for the prayers of the saints,²⁸ a sea of glass like the great brazen sea in the temple courtyard,²⁹ and four fabulous beasts, which were copies of the cherubim overshadowing the mercy seat, carved on the temple walls and embroidered on the great veil.³⁰ Proceedings were climactic, beasts and priests celebrating each stage in the worship with antiphonal hymns, building up with a majestic crescendo to the moment when the lamb, priest and victim both, declared the will of the divine king.³¹ Here is revealed heaven's worship style—ceremonial, responsive (congregational participation is of its essence, for the priests are the whole church), profoundly reverent, awe-inspiring in setting, eloquent in symbolism and bodily posture. Above all, worship is organic. No trivial items here, no backroom informality. Extemporaneous chats with the heavenly father should be private, in our secret chamber with the door shut.

What a pity that irrational prejudice turns so many against the deeply moving blessing of a liturgical worship that originates in the audience chamber of the eternal king! There may be more truth in the observation of the poet Donne than we realize: "And for the debt of prayer, God will not be paid, with money of our own coining, (with sudden, extemporal, inconsiderate prayer) but with currant money, that bears the Kings Image, and inscription."³²

Far from returning to the greater informality of our past, Adventists should move forward to forms of worship that prepare us for the eternal wonders of

Apocalyptic liturgy. Let us worship with the priestly and royal dignity to which we, as God's own people, lay claim; for whether we remember it or forget, we are in fact "come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,

and to innumerable hosts of angels . . . Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God, with reverence and awe: for our God is a consuming fire."³³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XII, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 320 col. 2.
2. *Ibid.*, vol. VI p. 355 col. 2
3. Gen. 1. 28-30
4. Heb. 7. 7
5. Gen. 3. 8-10
6. Gen. 24.26, Exod. 3.6
7. Psalms. 95.6
8. Gen. 8. 20-21
9. Gen. 4. 7-8
10. Gen. 4. 26
11. Exod. 19. 3-6, 1 Sam. 8.7
12. Psalms. 5.2, 10.16, 24.8, 29.10 etc.
13. Psalms. 2. 2,7
14. Joseph Angus, *The Bible Handbook*, (London, 1908), p. 422-23.
15. Exod. 19. 21-22, Lev. 1
16. Gal. 3. 29
17. Acts 2. 46
18. Paul evidently made little effort to wean Christian Jews from their traditional religious forms. He even placated them by having Timothy circumcised! What he opposed was the compelling of Gentile believers to adopt practices that were outmoded. His dispute with Judaizers was not to settle a controversy concerning liturgical worship. There is no mention of such a controversy in the New Testament. He himself worshipped in the Temple when he was in Jerusalem and in synagogues (until local Jews drove him out) when he was on tour.
19. Early Christian basilicas were approached through a courtyard (atrium) where a fountain stood for ceremonial ablutions before entering the church. One such atrium still survives in the church of San Ambrogio, Milan. Unbaptized persons could then proceed only as far as the narthex. The baptized (presumably considered spiritual priests) could pro-

- ceed into the nave to worship. The clergy (presbyters) occupied the apsidal presbytery. The hemispherical shape of the apse symbolized eternity, God's dwelling, the Christian equivalent to the holy of holies. The altar was placed symbolically between the nave and the apse at the focal point of the whole building to indicate that an entrance into eternal life was through the supreme sacrifice of Christ, "through the veil of His flesh." The altar was usually erected over the grave of a martyr (witness) —cf the souls of martyred Christians under the altar in Rev. 6.9—hence, because Christ is the true Witness and the martyr is also a witness, the whole was called the *confessio* and the sanctity of the altar derives from the Old Testament sanctuary.
20. 1 Sam. 15.22, Isa. 1.13, Joel 2.13
 21. Heb. 10.20
 22. Heb. 8.1-6
 23. Heb. 4. 2-11 makes the parallel nature of the epistle's argument very clear.
 24. Heb. 8. 4-5. The comparison is worked out fully in chapters 8-10.
 25. 1 Chron. 24.5, 5-18
 26. Exod. 39. 27-30
 27. Exod. 37. 17-24
 28. Exod. 37. 25-29, Rev. 5.8. Subsequent references fill in details of the heavenly sanctuary as described in the Apocalypse: the altar of incense in 8.3 and the altar of sacrifice in 6.9. It suggests that martyrs are an equivalent to the ancient sacrificial victims.
 29. 2 Chron, 4. 2-6, 10
 30. 1 Kings 6. 23-30, 2 Chron, 3, 7, Ezek. 1.6, 10, 18, 22, 26 and 10. 14, 20-22.
 31. Rev. 5. 7 and 6ff.
 32. H.W. Garrod (ed), John Donne, *Poetry and Prose*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 89.
 33. Heb. 12.22, 28-29