
Must We Keep the Sanctuary Doctrine?

by Edward W. Vick

The Seventh-day Adventist church is consciously reassessing some of its essential doctrines. That process has been extended by the three articles reinterpreting the doctrine of the sanctuary, which appeared in the last issue of *Spectrum* (vol. 14, no. 1).

In the first essay, Richard Rice proposed that the insights of Pannenberg and process theology help to draw out the contemporary significance of the sanctuary doctrine (pp. 36–38). For Fritz Guy, doctrines such as the sanctuary, heaven, Jesus as high priest, are “symbolic” in that they have meanings which go beyond what may be gained from a literal interpretation. For him, the general theological assertion which arises out of the narrative symbolism of the sanctuary doctrine is that God is continuously with his people (p. 45). John Dybdahl, while more concerned than either Rice or Guy with preserving the traditional meaning of the doctrine, found emphases in the sanctuary different from the original meaning of the doctrine (p. 50).

Edward Vick, formerly a professor of theology at the SDA Theological Seminary, is presently chairman of the department of religious studies at Forest Fields College in Nottingham, England. He earned his B. Lit. from Oxford University and received a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. His most recent book is entitled *Is Salvation Really Free?*

What I shall argue is that an old doctrine necessarily undergoes serious changes in meaning as time passes, and that indeed from the beginning of Adventism the sanctuary doctrine has been undergoing significant reinterpretation. I shall also argue that the doctrine of the sanctuary does not alone serve to make contemporary Seventh-day Adventism “unique,” that it is not the only doctrine which supports our faith and gives our message an eschatological urgency. In fact, it is not necessary to maintain the identity of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

An oft-repeated claim in Seventh-day Adventist circles is that “we have the truth.” A corollary to this claim is that truth, once established, does not change but stands firm and unalterable. When a group puts together the principle, “we have the truth,” with the implications of the slogan, “the Bible and the Bible only,” the scheme of beliefs is then anchored to the past. Once the firm foundation of truth has been established, the community can rest, knowing that the central body of truths is secure. This claim is based on several very interesting assumptions. One of these is that truth is static and quantitative. Some groups have some truth. Others have more truth. But in his grace, God has seen to it that all truth has been made available, specifically to “his people,” the Seventh-day Adventists.

One of the interesting effects of this attitude of thinking of truth as contained in sets of fixed doctrinal propositions is the historical exercise of finding who else in the history of the Christian church held such views, and then to claim a lineage with them. But you do not and cannot guarantee the importance of a doctrine for us today, nor do you establish the truth of that doctrine, by tracing its history, not even by connecting it to Scripture. Among other things, you have to ask, "What did it mean?" and "What does it mean?" In a changing social and historical situation, the doctrine, even if repeated unchanged, no longer has the same significance. Moreover, statements may continue to be true while they are no longer considered significant.

William Miller understood the words of Daniel 8:14, "Unto two thousand and three hundred days, then shall the sanctuary be cleansed," in a way very different from the way the earliest Seventh-day Adventists understood them. (By "earliest Adventists" I mean those who survived the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, when the return of Jesus to cleanse the sanctuary of the earth did not take place.) The Seventh-day Adventists in the 1880s understood these words in still another way, very different from the way the earliest Adventists understood them. The same words have had at least three different meanings in the history of a given community.

For Miller, that the sanctuary would be cleansed in 1844 meant that the end was imminent. He thought and preached in terms of an end. The day after the Great Disappointment, Hiram Edson had a vision in a cornfield in which he saw that the sanctuary was not the earth, to be cleansed by fire, but was in heaven, to be cleansed in some other way. This was a revolutionary insight, involving a complete recasting of an earlier belief and teaching, not just a

revision of one simple point. Edson, and those who endorsed his new interpretation, thought in terms of a beginning, and hence an indefinite extension of time, of which the length could not be specified.

This new perspective, so dramatically meaningful in light of recent experience, led to a doctrine which directly contradicted previous teachings. They reformulated the doctrine of the sanctuary in the emotional

It is well borne out in church history that once a community is established it can and does assess, modify, or reject certain of its doctrinal foundations.

belief that came from seeing something constructive emerge from a bitter disillusionment. Today the sanctuary doctrine does not mean what it meant to the early Adventists. In fact, in one important respect, Seventh-day Adventists now make an appeal to the sanctuary that is precisely opposite to the meaning the sanctuary had for early Adventists. For them the sanctuary meant that they had more time to plan, to think, to work again for the saving of souls and the spreading of the gospel in the world. They could regroup and reassess, knowing that 1844 was the beginning and not the end. They were, like the early Christians, relieved to know that they had good reason to believe that "the end is not yet," (Matthew 24:6). Time would continue.

A century-and-a-half later, the sanctuary means the opposite for Seventh-day Adventists. As now taught, the sanctuary encourages a sense of urgency that the end is very near indeed. When the sanctuary is cleansed, the end is imminent. Since we cannot know when the end is, or when the time of opportunity will come to an end, we must be ready at any time. There is to be no reckoning now for time to be stretched out, as when the doctrine was first taught by the

early Adventists. Time is now practically at an end.

With this radically different meaning, the function of the doctrine has also changed. Edson and the early Adventists experienced a disappointment in their expectation of something supremely significant happening in 1844. But they maintained a common belief that something supremely significant had happened by working out together the significance of the “work” of Jesus in the sanctuary. The common emotional and personal involvement in the events they had shared and were sharing and their common interest in theological questions served to unite them. The development of the sanctuary doctrine was thus functionally necessary to produce a community. We cannot specify any such unique function which the reasserted, revised doctrine now has.

Here we must distinguish the function or effect of a doctrine from the truth of the doctrine. One criterion of a doctrine’s importance is whether teaching it is necessary for the community to continue. A second criterion is whether the doctrine is true. It is obvious enough that error agreed upon may be functionally necessary for the continuance of a community, the Flat Earth Society being a case in point. But what was necessary to unite the community at the beginning may not be necessary at a later stage. Some teachings are more important at some times than at other times.

It is well borne out in church history that once a community is established it can and does assess, modify, or reject certain of its doctrinal foundations. The theologian’s task, as I see it, is to anticipate changes in meaning, reinterpret traditional doctrines in light of new contexts, and articulate these new meanings to the church body. In this way, doctrines do not become dogma but remain data for questions and interpretations, occasions for theological insights. In this process of reinterpretation, retaining, as

far as possible, the original form and wording of long-established doctrines connects new insights to the tradition, lending them a certain authenticity they might not otherwise have.

One of the ways in which such assessment can take place is by asking about the status of the doctrine, whether it is to be taken literally or metaphorically. Obviously, if the propositions in a doctrine were once taken literally and later came to be understood symbolically, an important change of status has taken place. In the case of the sanctuary doctrine, some Adventist interpreters have taken it to be quasi-literal, others as allegorical or typological, others yet as mythological (even if they would not want to have these labels attached to their interpretations.) The meaning of this doctrine has been grasped by speaking of the relation of God to believers, the urgency of

The sanctuary doctrine does not have an essentially unique function for contemporary Seventh-day Adventism; it is not the only doctrine which builds our faith.

making decisions of faith, the appeal for moral living, and by variations on the theme of personal and corporate judgment. Sometimes, unfortunately, it has led to unsatisfactory statements about God the Father and God the Son. In other versions, it has quite literally been used to refer to goings-on in a space/time not accessible to us, but nevertheless significant for events in our world.

However it is interpreted and whatever its status, a doctrine which is assumed to be necessary for the unity of the church becomes fixed, removed from the realm of questioning. Such a formal doctrine is one we assert the truth of and confess belief in, even if it plays an insignificant part in the instruction of the community.

I propose that the continuing existence and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist community does *not* depend upon the continual reassertion of our original doctrine of the sanctuary. Seventh-day Adventism is much more complex now than it was in the formative days when agreement, at least in broad principle, about the sanctuary teaching was *the* unifying factor. The grounds for our unity are still doctrinal, but now are more complex.

Thus, the sanctuary doctrine does not have an essentially unique function for contemporary Seventh-day Adventism; it is not the only doctrine which builds our faith, gives a sense of urgency to our decisions, reminds us that God is provident, that history has a purpose, and that Jesus Christ is the focal point of God's revelation and of the church's life. It is not the one teaching which supports the Adventist church.

Nor is the traditional doctrine of the sanctuary necessary for the identity of the

Seventh-day Adventist church. Saturday as day of worship; belief in Jesus Christ and in the imminence of the Second Advent; emphasis on healthful living; these features taken together readily distinguish Adventists from any other religious group.

Seventh-day Adventists will, I believe, benefit from careful and serious consideration of the issues raised by our various attempts to reexamine and reinterpret traditional Adventist doctrines. We need to ask ourselves quite seriously whether we still value genuine conversation, whether we, like our Adventist forbears, can see discussion as a way forward, a means through which God may reveal himself. This, after all, is a community which came into being because it thought it experienced the guidance of God through discussion, debate, and continuing assessment. Who knows but that God is once again calling Seventh-day Adventists to change their doctrinal interpretations and take faith more seriously?