



# The Sanctuary— God in Our Midst

God gave us a sanctuary so that he might dwell in our midst.  
The sanctuary opens a way between heaven and earth.

by Glen Greenwalt

I STILL VIVIDLY REMEMBER GOING TO CHURCH IN my freshman year of college and listening to a sermon in which a pastor, by adding the 120 years of Noah's preaching and the three and one-half years of Elijah's message to the year 1844, predicted that Jesus would return in 1968.<sup>1</sup> I was profoundly impressed by the preacher's sermon, as were many of my classmates. The sermon was consistent with everything I had ever heard in my Adventist instruction. The preacher's argument simply followed the wonderful logic of numbers and symbols that was indelibly imprinted upon my youthful mind.

Then, in my junior year in college, I took courses in Daniel, Revelation, and Biblical Eschatology where, for the first time, I caught a picture of how long God's people have been waiting for the fulfillment of their salvation. But I never really saw the suffering and

disappointed hopes of previous generations as being real. All of their stories were just so many examples written for our day. Time had always been short in my Adventist view. It began in 1844. Time really had lasted only a little more than a hundred years. I actually knew people who had listened to Ellen White and many of the other early pioneers preach. I knew, that is to say, people who spoke to people who lived at the beginning of time!

Today my generation is in its mid-forties and these sorts of arguments no longer work for us, let alone for our children. Last fall, in anticipation of this year's 150-year anniversary of 1844, I took a few informal surveys to see if this generation of Adventists shared the same vision as held by their grandparents' or even parents' generation. I discovered that 78 percent of a Sabbath school class comprised of mostly retirees, many of whom had been denominational employees, believed that the date of 1844 was extremely important or very important to their faith, but only 9 percent of a class of college sophomore voted likewise. Whereas 65 percent of the retirees' class

---

*Glen Greenwalt, professor of theology at Walla Walla College, his alma mater, received his M.Div. from the SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, and his Ph.D. in theology from Vanderbilt University. His dissertation title was, "Dialogue and Praxis: The Quest for an Historically Sensitive Theology."*

believed that the church was spending about the right amount of time on time prophecies, or the church should spend even more time on these prophecies, 95 percent of their grandchildren marked on their survey the response that the church should “stop trying to prove time prophecies altogether and move on to bigger, more important issues.”

The question, of course, is Where do we go from here? How does a community direct its course when it has outlived its own best understandings of itself? As Adventists we never expected the world to last this long. One hundred fifty years of delay is not something to celebrate for Adventists who look for the soon return of Christ. By far, the most important question facing Adventists today is, How does a community plot a future course when it has journeyed beyond the borders of its own charts and maps?

Little imagination is required to see that, as a community, we who are Adventists are beginning to divide along the natural lines of a group of travelers who are no longer certain of their direction. Some of us are wanting to go back to landmarks and wait there for Jesus to return; but to follow that course is certainly to forsake the Adventist call to present truth. At the opposite end of the line are a growing number of Adventists, particularly the young, who insist that we need to push ahead in the spirit of the pioneers in our discovery of new truths and landmarks, even if that means giving up many of their doctrines. But certainly this is no better proposal for setting our course direction. People suffering from amnesia make poor travelers. To become forgetful of

one's past is to lose sight of the very reference points that give direction to a journey. In the middle are the vast majority of Adventists—laypersons, administrators, and academics alike—whose overriding concern is simply one of holding the fraying lines of the community together. Unfortunately, a directional compass set only on holding the community together is a compass that has no bearing. Not only is the middle road often the wrong road, but as any tour leader knows, a style of leadership based on “keeping the troops together” works only so long as everyone is heading in basically the same direction.

In my own answer to the question of Where do we go from here? I propose that we as Adventists must recover a more profound sense of our status as pilgrim people. To begin with, we need to recognize that we always begin a journey from where we now stand. Then, we need to realize that none of us is the source of our own beginnings. Everything is a preface, a middle, and an ending of something else. On the pilgrimage that is Adventism, landmarks should be recognized as changing points of reference, rather than established goals. We do not honor our tradition by simply trying to mimic the experience of our ancestors. To forsake the past or to idolize it is equally dangerous. To idolize the past is to give up the journey along the way. On the other hand, to forget one's starting point is to become hopelessly lost on the journey. We honor our tradition best, and are most secure in determining our future, when we engage all Adventists, even those long past, in a lively conversation regarding the challenges and

---

*Adventists never expected the world to last this long. The most important question facing Adventists today is, How does a community plot a future course when it has journeyed beyond the borders of its own charts and maps?*

tasks that now stand in our path.

My own starting point for appreciating 1844 and the beginnings of Adventism, as well as envisioning the future journey of the church, is Mervyn Maxwell's high school textbook, *Moving Out! Breaking Through With God's Church*. Maxwell, by both the title of his book and his gift as a storyteller, reminds us of the power of our pioneers' stories and what they can still mean in our pilgrimage today.

## William Miller: A Personal, Historical Vision

Any story of 1844 must begin with William Miller and his prediction that Jesus would return to earth "about the year 1843." William Miller was not a trained biblical scholar, but he was by all accounts a remarkable man, possessing gifts of both intellectual rigor and great charisma. In 1814, William Miller became Captain William Miller when 47 fellow Yankees volunteered to join the battle against the British at Lake Champlain under his command. After the battle Miller boasted that the

Adapted from Corregio's cupola, "The Vision of St. John on Patmos of the Risen Christ and the other Apostles"



"rockets flew like hailstones," but that he had not flinched. "I am satisfied that I can fight. I know that I am no coward."<sup>2</sup>

After the war, Miller was a popular Fourth of July speaker. But the war had changed Miller in ways beyond making a captain out of a New England landowner. As happens with many who survive the horrors of war, Miller underwent a religious awakening in his life. I found in the Bible, Miller wrote later, "such a Savior as I needed."<sup>3</sup> While the church and the world remember Miller as a man obsessed with dates and time charts, Miller himself recognized his greatest discovery in life to be the discovery of a personal Savior alive in the world. "In Jesus," Miller wrote, "I found a friend."<sup>4</sup>

The importance of Miller's discovery is not fully appreciated without knowing that before the war Miller had been a Deist. Deists are often dismissed as near-atheists who view God as a master clock maker, a Being who made the world and then abandoned it to its own devices.

While the clock-maker metaphor illustrates the mechanical notion of the universe held by Deists, it fails to evoke the optimistic religious sentiment that the clock-maker illustration expresses. If the world is, in fact, the accomplishment of God's perfect, all-knowing will, then the world cannot really be different than it is, since divine foreknowledge accounts for all future events—even our prayers, which we were part of the world from the beginning!

As a consequence, this world, with whatever evil it contains, is in fact the best of all possible worlds, since it is the world God intended. While God does not determine human choices, God did give reality to the particular set of choices that now comprises human history. Of all the possible starting points God might have chosen in creating the world, he chose the beginning that led to this particular world.

My friend and colleague, John Brunt, has recently argued with great insight that Deism

never really left Miller's bones when he viewed the second coming of Christ.<sup>5</sup> For Miller, the spatial order of Deism was replaced by the temporal order of prophecy. The giant gears of prophetic inevitability had been set in motion, and they would move inextricably forward to the final countdown. That Miller never moved fully beyond Deism does not negate the importance for Adventists of Miller's discovery of the personal Savior he needed.

The idea of a personal God of history is central to Adventist thinking, although we have not always recognized the implications of our belief. A personal God is at the heart of Adventist Great Controversy theology. Love and grace limited the power and rights that belong properly to God, so that God, in creating the world, shared with it what was rightfully his own. This is a dumbfounding idea of immeasurable consequence. Only by withdrawing into the divine self, and thereby creating space and time for creatures, could God have created independent beings fashioned in the divine likeness. This means that the predictions of prophecy, like the history they predict, are open to change.

As Adventists, we have long taught that God's sacrifice on the cross was full and complete, but the work of saving human beings from their hurt and pain is not yet complete. This world is not yet totally under Christ's dominion. The salvation of the world is still in progress. The final outcome of our individual histories is not yet fully determined.

While the denominational leaders rightfully clarified in the 1960s the church's acceptance of the full and complete nature of Jesus' atoning work on the cross for our sins, Adventists should rightfully lead the way in reminding the world that the plan of salvation is not yet complete. The effects of sin are still all about us. Even on good days, children still die.

Now, to acknowledge this ongoing struggle means that God is not the clock-maker God.

It is to acknowledge that time does not move forward inextricably toward its final end, but that our choices are real and in some sense determinative even for God. Human actions make a difference in history. History, Miller reminds us, moves to the heartbeat of a Friend.

## Charles Fitch: A Dark, Nightly Vision

One of the individuals who joined Miller in declaring a soon-coming Savior to the world was Charles Fitch, a circuit-riding, Congregational pastor. Fitch stands out in the early Adventist story not for what he taught, but for what happened to him. In the summer of 1844, the Millerite movement was galvanized when Samuel Snow made his famous prediction that just as Jesus died on Passover as the lamb of sacrifice, so Jesus would return as the Lamb of Atonement on the Jewish Day of Atonement, which happened to fall on October 22—a date less than three months away. As a result of Snow's announcement, thousands of new converts poured into the Millerite movement. In many towns, saloons were closed. In others, church bells tolled every hour, calling sinners to repentance.

Not long before October 22, Fitch had three groups of people who came to him for baptism. The water was freezing cold up in New England, and riding home, Fitch took ill and died on October 14, just eight days before he expected Jesus to return. In Mervyn Maxwell's telling of the story, he imagines what it was like for the Fitch family during the wait. Since Charles had been a circuit-riding preacher, he was often away for more than eight days at a time. The wait would be hard, but in eight days this father and husband would be back in the arms of his family! Mrs. Fitch and the children could wait that long. Finally the day arrived, the day Dad was coming home.

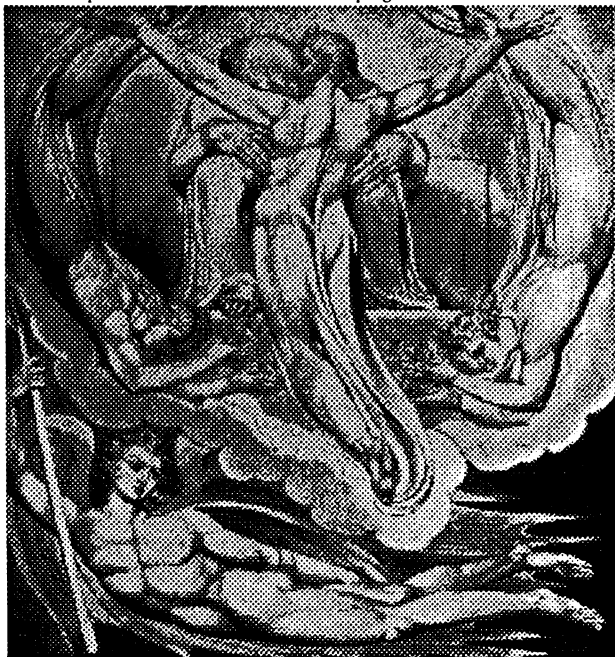
Some years ago Jan Daffern published what

I have long felt is one of the most insightful articles that has ever been written on the meaning of the 1844 experience.<sup>6</sup> In her article, Daffern suggested that perhaps we as Adventists, whose formative experience was shaped in the crucible of disappointment, are a people uniquely qualified to minister to hurting and disappointed people. This suggestion has profoundly affected my understanding of what it means to be an Adventist. As Adventists, our identity is often shaped by what we know, rather than by our hopes or faith.

From the story of Charles Fitch and his family's disappointment, I am reminded of my own great need and the need of the world around me for beacons of hope and courage that somehow yet shine, even when the lights of our answers have gone out. I am reminded that at some points in life, the only helpful friend is the one who doesn't try to explain pain, but who provides a hand and an arm to carry a friend beyond the severest reaches of pain.

In a suffering world, Adventist hospitals and churches, and most recently ADRA, have been beacons of such hope. I can't say how happy

Adapted from William Blake's "Christ Accepting the Office of Redeemer"



I was to be associated with the name of Adventists when I read in public news bulletins that Adventists were almost singlehandedly distributing care parcels in Sarajevo during last year's siege, because they were the only humanitarian group that was trusted by all sides in conflict to be fair. And again, in recent months, I have been proud to be an Adventist when I have read of the work ADRA is doing in Rwanda. As Adventists, caring for the dispossessed and the sorrowing is not a sideline. It is central to the mission of our story.

## Hiram Edson: A Prophetic, Heavenly Vision

After a night so dark it has forever been remembered as the night of the Great Disappointment, Hiram Edson was crossing a cornfield, returning home from the barn where he and others had spent the night in prayer. There, according to his own words, he "saw distinctly, and clearly, that instead of our High Priest *coming out* of the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary to come to this earth . . . , that he for the first time *entered* on that day the second apartment of that sanctuary."

Adventists have long speculated not only over the nature of Edson's experience, but also over its theological importance. In the painting I remember from childhood, Edson is standing in the middle of a cornfield, looking into heaven, where he sees Jesus in his priestly robes entering the heavenly courts on our behalf. While I have no way of knowing what Edson actually saw on that day, I believe that Edson's experience was truly visionary. For Edson saw what many prophets have seen in their hour of darkest trial—namely, a vision that Jesus had not abandoned them, but was even then working on their behalf in the courts of heaven.

I will not take time to remind the reader of the history of the Adventist speculation re-

garding the meaning of Edson's vision. Significantly, early Advent believers themselves offered a number of explanations of what Edson saw. It was only some 13 years after the Great Disappointment that the view was established that Jesus had gone into the most holy place, there to begin a work of investigating the books to see who would be saved and who would be lost. Today this view, like other explanations before it, is losing its persuasive appeal. As time continues, the explanatory power of our interpretation wanes.

Nevertheless, while some are ready to reject the whole experience of Adventism as little more than a strategy to save face in light of our mistaken predictions, I personally am intrigued by Edson's early vision. It seems to me to lie not only at the heart of the Adventist faith, but also the faith of all Christians longing for Jesus' coming in an hour of great darkness.

What strikes me about Edson's vision is that it stands in continuity with the visions many of the biblical writers received in their hour of trial and disappointment. Edson's vision is almost identical, for example, with that of Daniel 7, where Daniel sees one like a Son of Man standing before the Most High. The verdict is clear. Judgment is given for the saints and against the beast. Likewise, Edson sees what Stephen saw in his last hour as he was about to be stoned—again a vision of one like the Son of Man standing before the throne of God (Acts 7). The list goes on. Paul recounts in the book of Ephesians seeing heaven open and the saints sitting with Jesus on heavenly thrones. The book of Hebrews testifies that the way into the heavenly sanctuary is made open for every saint. And in the grand vision of the Apocalypse of the Revelator, John in his banishment on the Isle of Patmos sees Jesus ministering for the saints in the heavenly sanctuary.

In each case we find a similar pattern. In a time of great distress, God opens heaven to remind his people that they are not aban-

doned, but that God, even in their hour of distress, is working on their behalf.

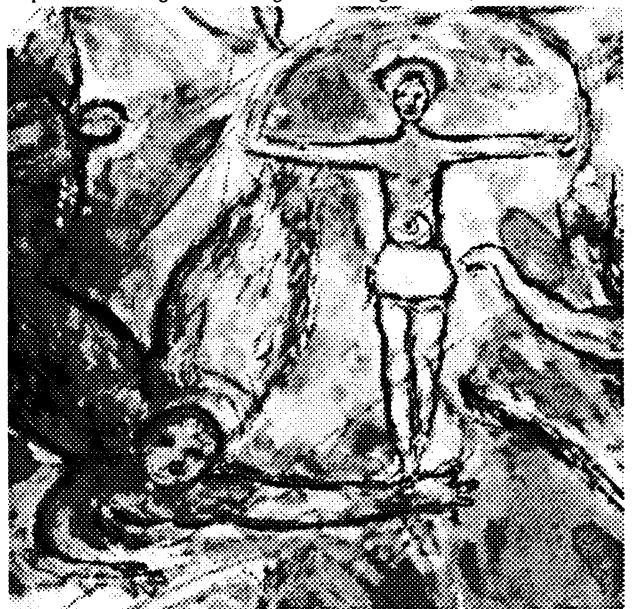
This is the central truth of the Christian faith. It is the central truth of Adventist faith. At times, we Adventists, like believers in every age, get so caught up in trifles that we overlook the truth staring us straight in the face. In our case we have gotten so caught up in our timetables and the pots and pans of the sanctuary that we have lost sight of the central truth: God gave us a sanctuary so that he might dwell in our midst. The sanctuary opens a way between heaven and earth. The sanctuary brings us to the very heart of God.

This is the story that still wins human beings over to the side of God. This is the story that Adventists have been called to give to the world.

## Ellen White: A Practical, Down-to-Earth Vision

Some may wonder why I identify Hiram Edson with the prophetic, heavenly vision, and Ellen White with the practical, down-to-earth vision. After all, Adventists recognize Ellen White, and not Hiram Edson, as the

Adapted from Marc Chagall's final drawing for the stained glass window, "The Good Samaritan"



prophetic messenger to the remnant church. What strikes me in reading *The Great Controversy* account of the Adventist experience of 1844 is that, while Ellen White recounts the theological explanations used by the early pioneers to explain 1844, her own emphasis lies elsewhere. For Ellen White, the primary evidence that God was in the Advent movement of the mid-1800s was located in the overwhelming spirit of Christian charity and virtue that surrounded the movement.

"The message, 'Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!' was not so much a matter of argument," Ellen White writes, "though the Scripture proof was clear and conclusive." Rather, "There went with it an impelling power that moved the soul."<sup>7</sup> For Ellen White, the evidence that confirmed the movement was of God was the fact that "It bore the characteristics that mark the work of God in every age. . . ."<sup>8</sup> There was persevering prayer and unreserved consecration to God.

What is most striking about Ellen White's account of the 1844 experience is that she believed God was present in the experience of 1844, because God was doing in 1844 what he has been doing in every age, namely restoring people to himself. In contrast to the way I learned the story, in which my experience as an Adventist was detached from the experience of other believers by the fact of 1844, Ellen White places 1844 in the context of the whole history of Christianity. She emphasizes the validity of the Adventist experience, precisely because of its shared resemblance to God's work in every age! This is an idea we as Adventists have only

begun to explore.

I believe Ellen White takes us back to the original theology of the sanctuary that emerges from the book of Leviticus.

In Leviticus 26, three principles are established regarding the sanctuary. The first is that the sanctuary was to be built so that God could dwell in the midst of his people (verse 11). Israel's security and prosperity were dependent upon God's presence. The second principle was a warning: Not even God can dwell forever in a polluted environment. The sins of God's people, both religious and moral, would force God to abandon his sanctuary and leave it desolate (verse 34). It was this principle in Leviticus that Daniel recalls in Daniel 9 when he confesses the sins of his people. Thirdly, in the end, God's warnings always end in promise. If Israel sins, and then repents of her sins, God will again dwell in the midst of his people and restore the fortunes of the sanctuary and the land (Leviticus 26:40ff).

1844, I believe, fulfills this paradigm. Adventism represents part of a great revival of God's spirit that awakened the church in the mid-19th century. The validity of the Adventist experience does not arise from the fact that he acted in an isolated manner in our church apart from what God was doing elsewhere in the world. The validity of Adventism comes from his ambassadors in restoring a right relationship between God and all people. It is because the work committed to Adventists is the same that has been committed to God's people from the beginning of time that I have confidence in the Adventist movement.

---

*Edson's early vision seems to me to lie not only at the heart of the Adventist faith, but also the faith of all Christians longing for Jesus' coming in an hour of great darkness. Edson's vision stands in continuity with the visions many biblical writers received in their hour of trial and disappointment.*

Of course, the sanctuary is not yet completely restored. The covenant God first made to Israel will not be complete until God, really, truly, honestly dwells in the midst of his people. On that day all tears will be wiped

from all eyes, for John saw in that land no temple, because the Lord Almighty and the Lamb *are* its temple (Revelation 21:22).

This is the fullest Adventist vision—the vision that must not die.

---

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I recently went out to a small church for a weekend seminar on 1844 where I discovered a new wrinkle to this argument. A very sincere brother of the church argued that if one added the 153 fish that the disciples caught in their nets and the three and one-half years of the Elijah message to 1844 one came up with the year 2000, when this brother predicted Jesus would come.

2. Quoted by Mervyn Maxwell in his book, *Moving Out: Breaking Through With God's Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1973), p. 4. The original is in the Adventural Collection of the library at Aurora College, Aurora, Ill.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 18. The original is found in William Miller,

*Apology and Defense* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1845), p. 24.

4. *Ibid.*

5. John Brunt, "The Disappointment and the Hope of the Advent Yet to Come," to be published later in a collection of articles remembering 1844.

6. Jan Daffern, "Singing in a Strange Land," Roy Branson, ed., *Pilgrimage of Hope* (Takoma Park, Md.: Association of Adventist Forums, 1986), pp. 89-97.

7. Maxwell, p. 23. The original is located in the Adventist Source Collection, Heritage Room, James White Library, Andrews University.

8. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1911), p. 402.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 400.