

# The Drama of Adventist Worship

*By Roy Branson*

**O**n October 22, 1844, Adventists endured a cosmic tragedy. The Great Disappointment was the devastation Adventists experienced at not entering the physical presence of the Lord of Hosts. Adventists can still not guarantee the moment of the Lord's return. But if we grasp the central importance of worship, Adventists can have the special mission of creating worships that reenact the whole drama of the ages. Sabbath worships in congregations shaped by the Apocalypse of John can powerfully and distinctively draw humans out of despair and assure us that events are not out of control, that God has redeemed human history, and that in some real sense on Sabbath morning we have experienced the great day of the Lord.

The more intensely worship gives us a sense of order the more moments of novelty create a sense of surprise and freedom. Liturgies are dramas that draw us into the events and characters that have created us. No wonder drama emerged from worship. Worship, like drama, responds to the basic yearning of humans to find a calming order in the terror of sheer randomness. Through action and word, worship and drama bring us out of chaos into coherence. Worship draws us into God's act of creation.

## Pilgrimage to the Last Days

Adventists after the Great Disappointment were like the Israelites after being taken into exile in Babylon. Both groups felt they were remnants, cut off from a God who had not appeared. Like Israel, Adventists turned for comfort to the experience of worship. Both the Old Testament remnant of Israel and the nineteenth-century remnant of Adventists found renewal by entering the sanctuary and the Sabbath and being overwhelmed by the reassuring presence of God. The weekly sense of God's presence in worship—on earth and in the realms above—became central to both remnants sustaining the hope of greeting God face to face.

Adventists, like other Christians, recreate within worship services special moments in Christ's life—baptism and the Lord's Supper. In these dramatic reenactments ordained by Christ, called ordinances or sacraments, Adventists and the rest of Christendom feel God's presence in a special way. In dramatic acts of worship we remember how God acted in the past and will act in the future. The God who rescued continues to rescue.

Adventists have also persisted in emphasizing the importance for all Christians of the sanctuary and the Sabbath. They are ways, Adventists affirm, in which all believers can experience in worship confidence in God's continuing lordship over time and space, that is, over everything. The greatest gift of Adventists to humanity is

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not "hastening the end" through the moral purity of our lives, but embodying God's just and peaceable kingdom and inviting all to share in celebrating Sabbath worship at the culmination of every week. By celebrating in our sanctuaries God's leading through the week, we participate each Sabbath in the grandeur of God's mighty, redeeming march through history, from the beginning to the end of time.

Adventist worship should reflect this emphasis on God's lordship over the whole of history found in the apocalyptic parts of the Bible that have especially nurtured us—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, parts of other prophets and the Gospels, and the book of Revelation. Some Christian traditions focus on Christ's death and sacrifice, and others on his resurrection. Adventist worship services should be dramas that attempt to convey the entire sweep of God's activity: from forming order out of chaos in creation, through the turbulence of human sin and redemption, to the culminating celebration of peace and joy. Not just our message and our mission should be global. The order of Adventist worship should reflect the encompassing scope of the Bible's apocalyptic vision of salvation history.

### The Glory Dwells Among Us

The same apocalyptic parts of Scripture that emphasize God as the Savior of time and history also stress God as the Maker of heaven and earth. God rules both history and the cosmos, shapes both time and space, dwells in both the Sabbath and the sanctuary. The God of all makes his presence felt not only in particular times, but also in particular places. The voice out of the bush—"I am that I am"—demands that in his presence Moses remove his sandals; he is on holy ground. The children of Israel cannot follow Moses up the mountain, dare not touch the ark, must purify their bodies before entering the temple. Yahweh's presence dwells in a special tent, sanctuary, and temple. Each is filled with the distinctive glory of his presence.

The attention to the special space of the divine, distinguished from the space of humans, underscores the core drama of biblical worship. The drama is not

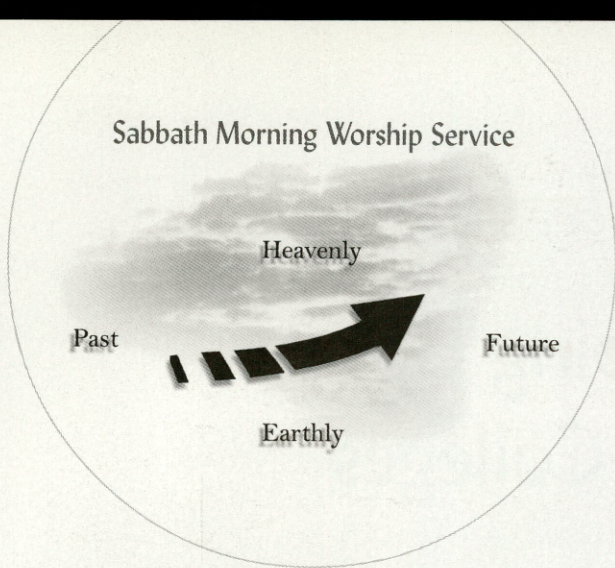
just the relation of worship with other worshippers. The central protagonists of biblical worship are God and humans. The focus of biblical worship is not on the quality of the relationship among the worshippers. Worship is not a caucus of peers. The focus of biblical worship is on God's relationship with his creatures.

The book of Revelation, more than any other New Testament book, is preoccupied with worship. It is true that Revelation opens with evaluations of the moral conduct and character of seven churches in Asia Minor. But the evaluations emanate from above, from the divine throne and sanctuary. Following this review of the conduct of seven churches, the book becomes a series of movements between God and his sanctuary above, and humans and the evil empire below. The scope of Revelation's condemnations of evil on earth are broad and all-encompassing because they originate from so far on high.

Worship shaped by the Apocalypse of John does not devote most of its time to improving interspersed relationships among members of the congregation. Of course, Revelation condemns unjust, horizontal relationships among human beings in brutal, even bloody terms. But worship shaped by John's Apocalypse couches moral exhortation of human beings in the light of vertical divine action. The conclusion of the biblical saga, according to John, is the drama of nothing less than the transformation of all the Babylons and holocausts of history into God's sanctuary, a divine refuge for the nations of the earth. Pastoral condemnations of injustice are more vivid when they occur in the midst of worship services that make congregations ache for the beauty of the good.

### Sabbath Morning is a Song of Ascents

Crucial to a drama is plotting its movement. Worship as drama within a community shaped by apocalyptic parts of the Bible is driven by two central movements. One movement is temporal. Worship moves horizontally from the past of creation to the future of the Second Coming. The other movement is spatial. Worship moves vertically from human concerns to the realm of the divine.



The main point of the diagram (above) is that an Adventist worship service shaped by biblical apocalyptic reaches its climax with an experience of exaltation—a foretaste in our present worship service of a divinely ordained future.

Specific implementation of the temporal movement means the church service begins with resounding music and a choral processional; out of cacophony comes harmony and direction. From the disorder of the week we enter the divinely ordered time of the Sabbath. Initial Scripture from Genesis, the Psalms, Job, or Colossians, can evoke God's act of creation. Subsequent Scriptures can be read in the sequence of salvation history: the Prophets early in the service, the Gospels at the center, passages from apocalyptic toward the climax of worship, including the benediction.

Typically, Christian communities put the Christ event at the center of the worship service. Some, reenact Christ's sacrifice by each week celebrating Communion at the heart of the main worship service. For other Christians, the core of the service is the sermon, understood in some communities as a breaking open of the Scriptures, the Bread of Life. Adventists have been among those who have emphasized the weekly sermon, rather than the weekly communion.

For Adventists, of course, the Great Controversy continues beyond the cross. Adventists emphasize not only the Christ of the cross, but also the risen and still active Christ of the sanctuary and the Second Coming, the Christ who remains active, redeeming and transforming our lives, our culture, our civilization. Adventists can enrich all Christians by making certain that worship services expand beyond the Communion and the sermon. The climax of worship can embody the glorious climax of salvation history. The end of Adventist worship services can include the morning's major choral anthem, followed by mighty congregational hymns, with the choir singing a descant, and a

brass ensemble playing through the choir's recessional. The scriptural benediction can even be recited antiphonally by different sections of the choir, and both with the pastor. Adventists can make certain that worship services do not decline but ascend; that the end of the worship is not a denouement, but a culmination; that Sabbath morning worship is itself a drama of the ages.

Implementation of the second, spatial movement means Sabbath morning worship in an Adventist church begins with more mundane concerns and progresses toward the heavenly hosts. If the Sabbath day is the equivalent of the sanctuary, the morning worship service is the Holy Place. The processional of the choir from the entrance to the front of the sanctuary embodies the movement of the congregation from the worlds of commerce and government and education into the sanctuary, and a unique sense of God's presence in the world.

The "business" of the church—announcements and "windows"—is a bridge from our jobs and roles furthering God's work in creation to the presence of God. The offering physically takes the fruit of our participation in God's work of creation before the Lord himself. Worship does not denounce the world. In worship God consecrates our labors as his.

Scriptures and sermon and prayer connect this sanctuary with the heavenly realms. In the anthems of the choir and the congregation, the music of the organ and myriad instruments, we reverberate to the sounds of the heavenly hosts. In Sabbath worship, we invite all God's creatures to join the alleluias of the myriad hosts of heaven before the throne of the Lamb: "Blessing and honor and glory and might, forever and ever!" In worship, God has worked the miracle of transforming the secular into the sacred. Our sanctuary has become a dwelling place of the Most Holy, our congregation part of the body of Christ.

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Roy Branson orchestrates one of Sligo Church's longest-running Sabbath School classes. He also is director of the Center for Law and Public Policy at Columbia Union College. Sdalaw@aol.com