

The Sanctuary and the Unbearable Loneliness of Being

By David R. Larson

If you have never been lonely, it will be difficult for you to appreciate the doctrine of the sanctuary. You may understand it theoretically; however, its practical value will probably bypass you. As Paul Tillich emphasized more than any other theologian in Christian history, a correlation prevails between particular Christian doctrines, on the one hand, and specific types of human experience, on the other. Loneliness is the experiential correlate of the doctrine of the sanctuary. *This* doctrine connects with *this* experience.

The loneliness of which we speak is historical, existential, and theological. When it is directly related to a negative event—a particular loss, disappointment, or disaster—it is historical. Finding out that for years your best friend has been committing adultery with your spouse and that you are the last to know is the sort of thing that can trigger this type of loneliness. The more general and vague feeling that we humans are bounded beings, that we can never wholly connect with others, that we achieve our unique and valuable identities

in part by cutting ourselves apart from our friends and relatives is what we mean by the term *existential loneliness*.

Even when we are not fully conscious of it, this kind of loneliness is always with us. To be, to exist as a human being, is to be lonely in this way. Theological loneliness strikes us when we deeply feel the absence of God. This happens to individuals; it also happens to classes of people or entire cultures. Although they outwardly react as differently as the morose Friedrich Nietzsche and the sunny Carl Sagan, today this form of loneli-



ness is deep and wide among those in educated circles.

There is no need to worry if you have not yet consciously experienced loneliness in any of these three forms. You will. No one who is mentally sound gets through this life without being very much aware of at least one of them. Even Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" When the unbearable loneliness of being comes your way, you will be in a better position to appreciate what the doctrine of the sanctuary offers.

Whe Seventh-day Adventists expound the doctrine of the sanctuary in three primary ways. For some of us, it is a vivid reminder that, because our bodies are the temples, or sanctuaries, of the Holy Spirit, increasingly our lives should be ethically pure. For others of us, the doctrine of the sanctuary depicts how the earthly and heavenly ministry of Jesus the Christ removes our guilt as sinners. For still others, it is a powerful reminder that we are never alone, that no matter what happens and no matter how we feel, the Father is always present.

All three approaches talk about all three things. Also, because we worship one God, each appeals to all three members of the one Trinity. They differ in their points of departure, organization of thought, and relative emphasis, however.

Unfortunately, those who emphasize the Holy Spirit and pure living and those who emphasize Jesus Christ and the removal of our guilt often disagree sharply. Too many of their exchanges are both arcane and acrimo-

nious. Much needless suffering and loss of talent is the sad result, more so in some parts of the Adventist world than in others. This is not as it should be. The doctrine of the sanctuary should draw us together, not drive us apart.

Because it is the most prominent in Scripture, and because it is the most needed today when the absence of God is felt so keenly and widely, we should increasingly emphasize the Father in the doctrine of the sanctuary. From this angle of vision, this doctrine is not primarily about how the Holy Spirit empowers righteous living. In the first instance, it is not about how the Son removes our guilt, either. Although these themes are also important, first and foremost the doctrine of the sanctuary is about how the unending presence of the Father soothes the unbearable loneliness of being.

We can summarize this emphasis in one word: *Immanuel*, which means "God with us." As illustrated by the following passages, this emphasis upon the unending presence of God threads its way through each of the six major portions of Scripture.

PENTATEUCH: "And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them." (Exod. 25:8 NRSV)

WRITINGS: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your



power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name." (Ps. 63:1-4 NRSV)

PROPHETS: "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore." (Ezek. 37:26-28 NRSV)

GOSPELS: "And the Word became flesh and lived [sanctuaried] among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14 NRSV)

LETTERS: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." (Heb. 8:10, 11 NRSV)

APOCALYPSE: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'" (Rev. 21:3, 4 NRSV)

As illustrated by the lives of those who passed through the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, the good news that God's presence is constant and comprehensive corresponds to the experience of historical and existential loneliness by addressing theological loneliness first.

Probably more than any other idea, the doctrine of the sanctuary comforted those who were heartbroken that the Second Coming of Jesus did not occur on that date, as they had anticipated from their study of Scripture. Hiram Edson's proposal that the "cleansing of the sanctuary" refers to events in heaven and not on earth assured him and his colleagues that, contrary to their feelings of intense sorrow, perplexity, and embarrassment, they had not been

abandoned by God. They were not alone.

Some today debate whether Hiram Edson and the others who were comforted by their revised doctrine of the sanctuary following the Great Disappointment understood every detail correctly. These exchanges sometimes miss the main point, however. Even if they did err in this or that detail of scriptural interpretation, the earliest Seventh-day Adventists correctly discerned the overall message of the sanctuary doctrine: we are not alone, God is still with us, life is still worth living, and someday we will laugh again because our joy will be full. This message was good news. It always is!

Getting the big picture but making some mistakes on some of the details is a fairly common thing in the history of Christian life. When Martin Luther declared that "the just shall live by faith," he communicated an important and much-needed truth even though virtually no specialist today believes that his historical reconstructions of the relevant passages of Scripture were precisely on target in every regard.

Debates continue as to whether something like this happened among those who established the Seventh-day Adventist Church after passing through the Great Disappointment. These exchanges should continue until we achieve consensus about what actually happened in the nineteenth century. The value of the doctrine of the sanctuary back then, and its worth to us today, do not depend on the outcome of these debates, however.

As contemporary scholarship in all fields increasingly recognizes, it is not always possible or even necessary exactly to recover what ancient texts meant to those who first wrote them. All authors send their texts on long journeys without the ability wholly to control the twists and turns in meaning that they will prompt along the way.

To be sure, we cannot make any text say whatever we want it to say and we shouldn't even try; nevertheless, if we get a text's overall message, and if this theme is reinforced by several other passages in the work as a whole, we can relax about the details. We can keep studying them without hanging too much on the outcomes of our research. How much worse it is to get all the little things right but to miss the big picture! This is another application of the advice of Jesus not to strain gnats and swallow camels. Sadly, sometimes this still happens.

When exploring such matters we do well to assess

the assumptions we bring to our discussions. For example, Ross Winkle, a church historian at Andrews University, has written a delightful and informative study about how we Seventh-day Adventists describe what Hiram Edson experienced regarding the sanctuary doctrine when walking across a field of corn shortly after the Great Disappointment. Sometimes we say that he experienced a "supernatural vision." On other occasions we insist that he experienced a "natural insight." Sometimes we even vacillate between these two views!

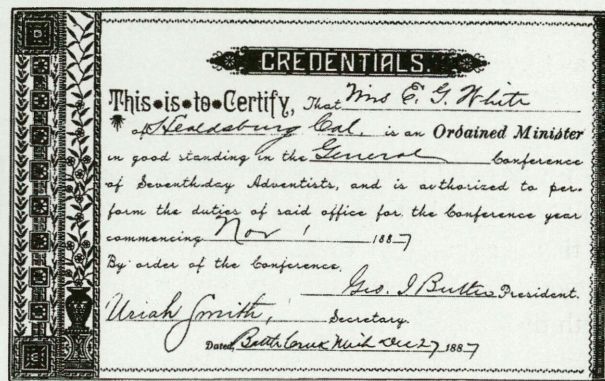
Our assumption seems to be that if Hiram Edson had a "supernatural vision" he got everything right, but that if he experienced a "natural insight" he may have been mistaken, either in whole or in part. As even the most superficial glance at Scripture confirms, this assumption, like many others that often accompany it, is false. In cases like this, the difference between "natural" and "supernatural" is not clear and distinct. Those who have unusual experiences do not always understand them correctly or communicate their meaning effectively.

Even if they succeed, their interpretations do not constitute for all time everything that can and should be said on the subject. Most importantly, we cannot establish the truth of an idea by appealing to nothing but how it came into awareness. We are to judge ideas by what they assert and not by how they come about. In and of themselves, although they may be fun to observe or experience, unusual occurrences prove nothing.

In *Desire of Ages*, Ellen White and her collaborators commented on the doctrine of the sanctuary in ways that still seem helpful. They wrote that God "abode in the sanctuary, in the midst of His people. Through all their weary wandering in the desert, the symbol of His presence was with them. So Christ set up His tabernacle in the midst of our human encampment. He pitched His tent by the side of the tents of men, that He might dwell among us, and make us familiar with His divine character and life" (23, 24).

Please don't accept or reject this just because Ellen White and those who helped her wrote it. Examine it, test it, and see if it makes sense, all things considered. If it does, allow yourself to be encouraged by the thought that no matter what happens God is present to comfort and to guide. If it doesn't add up, keep searching for something that does!

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