

Ellen G. White's Theology of Worship and Liturgy

Denis Fortin
Dean and Professor of Theology
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Any discussion of worship and liturgy is a touchy subject in most churches in North America—and not only in Seventh-day Adventist congregations. According to Paul Basden, “Throughout Christian history, public worship has attracted attention, stimulated discussion, and even provoked contention.”¹ This assessment seems accurate. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul faced issues of worship in the church at Corinth and part of the contention over the acceptance of Gentile Christians was whether Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ could worship together. During the Middle Ages, Eastern and Western Christianity divided over the use of icons in worship. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, while Reformers were basically in agreement over matters of faith and salvation, the bitter divisions between them over forms and elements of worship hindered their unity and common witness. Reformed Protestants and Catholics persecuted Anabaptists over their theology and practice of baptism; Luther scorned Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper; Puritans separated from Anglicans over the priority given to the preaching of the Word of God.

Although today we no longer kill people for disagreements over forms of worship, little has changed in regard to the questions that have divided Christianity over the centuries and many articles continue to be written on this subject in popular Christian journals.² For Seventh-day Adventists forms of worship have also become major points of contention. For decades we worshiped God along a traditional Protestant hymn-based worship format in which the sermon was the dominant element. Today, however, while the sermon tends to remain the dominant element—but the trend is a moving away from the traditional expository sermon to replace it with a narrative of personal faith and experience—the hymn-based singing is being replaced with more contemporary songs and music, a variety of musical instruments other than piano or organ

¹Paul F. M. Zahl et al., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), p. 11.

²A sample of recently published books and articles on worship includes the following: Thomas F. Best, *Worship today: Understanding practice, ecumenical implications* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2004); Cornelius Plantinga and Sue A. Rozeboom, *Discerning the spirits: A guide to thinking about Christian worship today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); John D. Witvliet, *Worship seeking understanding: Windows into Christian practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Philip Yancey, “A bow and a kiss: authentic worship reveals both the friendship and fear of God,” *Christianity Today*, May 2005, p. 80; Gary A. Parrett, “9.5 theses on worship: a disputation on the role of music,” *Christianity Today*, February 2005, pp. 38-42; Thomas G. Long, “Salvos in the worship wars,” *Living Pulpit*, January-March 2004, pp. 34-35; Christine A. Scheller, “Missing the rupture: how two groups address the real issues behind church splits,” *Christianity Today*, May 2003, pp. 42-43; Andy Crouch, “Amplified versions: worship wars come down to music and a power plug,” *Christianity Today*, April 22, 2002, p. 86; Donald N. Bastian, “The silenced word: why aren't evangelicals reading the Bible in worship anymore?” *Christianity Today*, March 5, 2001, p. 92; Donald G. Bloesch, “Whatever happened to God?” *Christianity Today*, February 5, 2001, pp. 54-55.

accompany the congregation, the order of worship is more spontaneous and less predictable, and the worshippers' response to music and words spoken is no longer a passive "Amen" but ranges from hand clapping to jumping. While some congregations have incorporated some elements of contemporary worship and music into the traditional hymn-based format, other congregations have completely replaced the traditional Adventist format with a contemporary or blended format. Where the membership is large enough to justify two worship services on Sabbath morning, one is likely more traditional while the other more contemporary. Worship services among youth and young adults in North America and other Western countries is typically a contemporary service involving audience response and participation, if it includes a sermon or exhortation, it is more likely to be a narrative story than an expository biblical sermon. To the extent that older members still hold a preference for a more traditional worship style, and in response to contemporary music and worship, some congregations have adopted more formal liturgical formats, heretofore scorned by Adventists, including more responsive readings, printed prayers, and clearly spelled out orders of worship. Yet, for good or bad, this trend and diversity are here to stay. Adventist worship in some congregations will never return to a simple hymn-based worship format. The Adventist sense of controversy and contention over forms of worship is easily perceived when one peruses the numerous titles of magazine articles or books published on the subject in the last few years.³

At this juncture in our history and given the developments in worship styles that have occurred in our congregations, a consideration of principles of worship as found in the Scripture and the writings of Ellen White can certainly enlighten the meaning and practice of Adventist worship. God's people must seek to understand and follow how God wishes to be worshiped. It was Ellen White's opinion that "unless correct ideas of true worship and true reverence are impressed upon the people, there will be a growing tendency to place the sacred and eternal on a level with common things" and thus offending God and disgracing religion. She also believed that God's people on earth must be prepared to appreciate worship in the heavenly courts above, "where every being has perfect reverence for God and His holiness."⁴

³A sample of recently published books and articles on Adventist worship indicates that the subject is widely discussed: Cynthia J. Brown, *Experiencing worship : God focused, Christ centered, Spirit filled: a complete worship planning guide for pastors, elders, worship leaders and worship teams*, Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2003; Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, editor, *Here we stand : evaluating new trends in the church*, Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2005; Harold B. Hannum, "Worship: Sacred and Secular," *Elder's Digest*, October/December 2007, pp. 18-20; Dan Day, "Inspiring, Intentional Worship," *Adventist World*—NAD Edition, January 2007, pp. 31-33; Audley C. Chambers, "Cyberspace Worship," *Adventist Review*, January 11, 2007, pp. 12-14; Stephen W. Case, "Bored at church," *Insight*, April 16, 2005, p. 12; Kate Simmons, "Shaking hands with God," *Outlook* (Mid American Union), January 2005, p. 19; Larissa Stanphill and Angela Shafer, "Worship when it counts," *Outlook* (Mid America Union), January 2005, p. 12-14; Tracy Darlington, "Raise your praise," *Insight*, November 13, 2004, p. 4-6; Thomas J. Mostert, jr., "Have we lost something?" *Pacific Union Recorder*, August 2005, p. 3; Ed Gallagher, "Joy in the house of prayer," *Outlook* (Mid-America Union), April 2005, p. 5; Henry Feyerabend, "The house of prayer," *Canadian Adventist Messenger*, May 2005, p. 10-13; Lillianne Doukhan, "How shall we worship?" *College and University Dialogue*, 2003 (15:3), pp. 17-19; Claudia Hirle, "The worship recognized by heaven," *Elder's Digest*, October-December 2003, pp. 16-17; Roy E. Branson, "The Drama of Adventist Worship," *Spectrum*, Autumn 2001, pp. 43-45; Ben Protasio, "Corporate worship can speak of God's power," *Southwestern Union Record*, February 2000, p. 6-7; Ron Thomsen, "Worship: What is right? What is wrong?" *Southwestern Union Record*, February 2000, p. 7.

⁴*My Life Today*, p. 285.

Already toward the end of the nineteenth century, in a testimony on the subject of worship written in 1889, Ellen White complained that “There has been a great change, not for the better, but for the worse, in the habits and customs of the people in reference to religious worship. The precious, the sacred, things which connect us with God are fast losing their hold upon our minds and hearts, and are being brought down to the level of common things.”⁵ To reverse this trend, she believed that “Christians may learn how they should regard the place where the Lord meets with His people” by studying God’s instructions to Israel regarding the sacredness of worship in the earthly sanctuary services. According to Mrs. White, this instruction was not limited to behavior in the place of worship but also included guidelines regarding the meaning, order and forms of worship.⁶

In order to gain a proper understanding of worship it is essential to begin with a biblical study of this subject. However, this paper will concentrate on the writings of Ellen White and will leave to someone else the task of doing the preliminary study from Scripture.

One major handicap, however, faces a study of Ellen White’s principles of worship—and for that matter biblical principles as well. In recent years, a postmodern hermeneutics of personal and cultural preferences has dominated any discussion of worship. Often veiled under the pretense of finding the only true and valid principles of worship, many studies have been biased as well by cultural and personal preferences. Hence, most Adventists today have resigned themselves to accept the notion that worship is primarily a personal matter, that no uniform, one-size-fit-all format and understanding of the meaning of worship are to be imposed on all people, and that worship style is a subject of congregational and cultural choices and preferences. And it is doubtful whether such an entrenched mind set can objectively consider the validity of external and transcendent norms of worship as found in the Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. Given that Ellen White lived and wrote in an era of Adventism that valued the traditional Protestant hymn-based form of worship, can a postmodern person who favors and acknowledges the intrinsic value of diversity and personal and cultural preferences accept to be bound by norms and principles of another era? Hopefully, the ideas, basic principles and concepts presented in this study will be helpful in providing insights to shape how we should understand and practice Adventist worship anywhere regardless of age or culture.

I. Biblical Principles of Worship Emphasized by Ellen White

In her discussion of Jesus’ adolescence and early adulthood in *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White states that Jesus understood part of his mission as teaching “the meaning of the worship of God.”⁷ Rejecting the “rigid rules” and “countless regulations” that guided worship in his time, Jesus sought to exemplify a simple form of worship based on the word of God. A biblical simplicity marked his worship of the Father. “He could not sanction the mingling of human requirements with the divine precepts. He did not attack the precepts or practices of the learned

⁵*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 491. This testimony, titled “Behavior in the House of God,” focuses on many principles of worship that Ellen White highlighted throughout her ministry.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Desire of Ages*, p. 84.

teachers; but when reproved for His own simple habits, He presented the word of God in justification of His conduct.”⁸

For Ellen White the meaning of true worship today should also be marked by such simplicity and she attempted to follow some basic biblical principles when she wrote about worship. A first biblical principle that she highlighted is that God alone should be the object of worship.⁹ In a world in which not only idols of wood and stone are worshiped, but in which human accomplishments, pride, and money are made gods, we are reminded that we are to “worship and serve the Lord God, and Him only. . . . Anything that is made the subject of undue thought and admiration, absorbing the mind, is a god chosen before the Lord.”¹⁰ “It is not men whom we are to exalt and worship; it is God, the only true and living God, to whom our worship and reverence are due.”¹¹ Furthermore, this worship centers on God’s creatorship. “The duty to worship God is based upon the fact that He is the Creator and that to Him all other beings owe their existence.”¹² Worship of the Creator God will manifest itself in reverence, joy and thanksgiving.¹³

Worship of God the Creator is also grounded in the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship. Ellen White’s understanding of the importance of the Sabbath also provides support for her biblical and theological principles undergirding her theology of worship (cf. Gen 2:1-3; Ex 20:8-11; Lev 23:2). She closely interrelated the concepts of worship of God and biblical eschatology. She believed that the fourth commandment of the Decalogue summons all humankind to worship God the Creator and, that at the end of time, the prophecies of the book of Revelation renew this universal call to worship the true God. In fact, much of the end time controversy between good and evil, Christ and Satan, is over who will be worshiped by mankind and on which day of the week. “The importance of the Sabbath as the memorial of creation is that it keeps ever present the true reason why worship is due to God,” she stated, “because He is the Creator, and we are His creatures.” Quoting J. N. Andrews’ *History of the Sabbath*, she agreed that “The Sabbath therefore lies at the very foundation of divine worship, for it teaches this great truth in the most impressive manner, and no other institution does this. The true ground of divine worship, not of that on the seventh day merely, but of all worship, is found in the distinction between the Creator and His creatures. This great fact can never become obsolete, and must never be forgotten.”¹⁴

⁸*Desire of Ages*, pp. 84-85. See also *Desire of Ages*, p. 261.

⁹*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 269; cf. Exodus 20:3-5, 23.

¹⁰*Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 56.

¹¹*Evangelism*, p. 133.

¹²*Great Controversy*, p. 436.

¹³*Great Controversy*, p. 436; *The Faith I Live By*, p. 287; *Steps to Christ*, p. 104.

¹⁴*Great Controversy*, pp. 437-438. See also *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 336; *The Faith I Live By*, p. 287. “It was to keep this truth ever before the minds of men, that God instituted the Sabbath in Eden;” she continued, “and so long as the fact that He is our Creator continues to be a reason why we should worship Him, so long the Sabbath will continue as its sign and memorial. Had the Sabbath been universally kept, man’s thoughts and affections would have been led to the Creator as the object of reverence and worship, and there would never have been an idolater, an atheist, or an infidel. The keeping of the Sabbath is a sign of loyalty to the true God, ‘Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.’ It follows that the message which commands men to worship God and keep His commandments [Rev. 14:6-12] will especially call upon them to keep the fourth commandment” (*Great Controversy*, p. 438).

A second biblical principle in Ellen White's understanding of true worship underlines the futility of exterior forms of worship deprived of biblical meaning and foundation (cf. Ex 20:4-6, 23). Commenting on the circumstances that led to Israel's Babylonian captivity, she said "Their religion had centered in the ceremonies of the sacrificial system. They had made the outward form all-important, while they had lost the spirit of true worship. Their services were corrupted with traditions and practices of heathenism, and in the performance of the sacrificial rites they did not look beyond the shadow of the substance. They did not discern Christ, the True Offering for the sins of man."¹⁵ Such a situation is in no way limited to the time of Israel's captivity. At the time of the Reformation, she understood that "religion was made to consist in a round of ceremonies, many of them borrowed from heathenism" leading the minds of the people away from God and the truth. "Senseless superstitions and rigorous exactions had taken the place of the true worship of God."¹⁶ Today, the same concerns still exist and many are tempted to look upon "outward forms" and ceremonies as sufficient indicators of true worship.¹⁷ For Ellen White, however, such "cannot be substituted for inward piety, and a conformity of the will to the will of Christ."¹⁸

Third, and in contrast to external forms, true worship is foremost spiritual.¹⁹ To the Samaritan woman, Jesus declared "that the time had arrived when the true worshipers need not seek a holy mountain nor sacred temple, but were to worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Religion was not to be confined to external forms and ceremonies, but was to be throned in the heart, purifying the life and actuating to good works."²⁰ And to Nicodemus Jesus explained that the spiritual renewal occasioned by the new birth experience is essential in true worship. "Not by seeking a holy mountain or a sacred temple are men brought into communion with heaven. Religion is not to be confined to external forms and ceremonies. . . . In order to serve Him aright, we must be born of the divine Spirit."²¹ True worship is thus the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit upon a person's life; it is the result of conversion. But true worship is also inspired by a "true knowledge of Jesus Christ."²²

A fourth biblical principle highlights the close relationship between worship and obedience to God's will. Genuine worship cannot be separated from a genuine Christian life. "True worship consists in working together with Christ. Prayers, exhortation, and talk are cheap fruits, which are frequently tied on; but fruits that are manifested in good works, in caring for the needy, the fatherless, and widows, are genuine fruits, and grow naturally upon a good tree."²³

From the biblical principles highlighted above flow Ellen White's counsels regarding one's experience of worship and how the various elements of worship should be conducted.

¹⁵*Upward Look*, p. 161. See also *Review and Herald*, November 24, 1896.

¹⁶*Signs of the Times*, May 31, 1883.

¹⁷*Ye Shall Receive Power*, p. 48; *Christian Service*, p. 217.

¹⁸*Bible Echo*, June 1, 1887.

¹⁹*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 143; *Prophets and Kings*, p. 565).

²⁰*Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 2, p. 144; cf. John 4:21-24.

²¹*Desire of Ages*, p. 189; cf. John 3:5-8.

²²*Medical Ministry*, p. 112; cf. John 17:3.

²³*Review and Herald*, August 16, 1881. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 24; vol. 9, p. 156; cf. Mat 25:34-40; James 1:27.

II. The Experience of Worship

In her writings, Ellen White highlights the need for the worshiper to have the proper attitude of reverence as one approaches God in worship. She also warns that feelings of excitement in worship are misleading indicators of genuine spirituality. Since true worship of God is first a spiritual activity, Ellen White repeatedly stressed that reverence for God and sacred things should mark Christian worship. “Another precious grace that should be carefully cherished is reverence. True reverence for God is inspired by a sense of His infinite greatness and a realization of His presence.”²⁴ As already indicated God’s claim to reverence and worship is based on the fact that he is the Creator.²⁵

This inner attitude of reverence, in the sense of respect, should be shown by Christians in their relationship with the sacred.²⁶ In response to Nadab and Abihu’s offering of a strange fire to God in the earthly sanctuary and complete disregard for God’s directives in worship, “God designed to teach the people that they must approach Him with reverence and awe.”²⁷ Reverence should be shown for sacred things and the “sacred name of Christ,”²⁸ and for the commandments of God and the Sabbath in particular.²⁹ Reverence is shown by bowing or kneeling before God during prayer at worship.³⁰

Mrs. White’s counsels regarding reverence for the house of worship is perhaps the most explicit explanation of what she meant by reverence.³¹ A sense of awe and respect should characterize the worshipers as they enter into the presence of God during the worship service. “To the humble, believing soul, the house of God on earth is the gate of heaven. The song of praise, the prayer, the words spoken by Christ’s representatives, are God’s appointed agencies to prepare a people for the church above, for that loftier worship into which there can enter nothing that defileth. From the sacredness which was attached to the earthly sanctuary, Christians may learn how they should regard the place where the Lord meets with His people.”³²

Believing that earthly worship is preparation for the heavenly, Ellen White argued that one’s attitude in the place of worship should be carefully guarded. When entering the place of worship, people should do so with decorum, going quietly to their seats.³³ “Common talking, whispering, and laughing should not be permitted in the house of worship, either before or after the service.” Before the meeting begins, silent meditation and prayer should occupy the worshipers.

²⁴*Education*, p. 242.

²⁵*Great Controversy*, pp. 436-437.

²⁶*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 91; vol. 6, p. 97.

²⁷*Counsels to the Church*, p. 100; cf. Lev 10:1-11.

²⁸*Signs of the Times*, February 24, 1890.

²⁹*Southern Watchman*, June 23, 1908.

³⁰*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 312. See also *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 28; *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 142.

³¹*Youth’s Instructor*, October 8, 1896.

³²*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 491.

³³While in Europe in 1885-1887, Ellen White visited a number of Scandinavian churches. After a visit in Stockholm, Sweden, she noted in her notes of travel that Scandinavians, “and in fact nearly all European worshipers, manifest much more reverence than is seen among Americans. As soon as they enter the place of worship, they bow their heads and offer silent prayer” (*Historical Sketches*, p. 188).

When the minister enters, it should be in a dignified manner. When the word is spoken, people should listen attentively as to the voice of God. After the meeting is over, the “precincts of the church should be invested with a sacred reverence” and casual conversations should be held outside the church.³⁴

Although many people will argue that Ellen White’s description of proper decorum in church was a reflection of her Victorian age and is therefore largely irrelevant for today’s social customs, we must at least concede that she based her understanding of reverence on the belief that in worship God meets with his people. She saw an important typological parallel between worship in the Old Testament sanctuary services and worship in modern times in preparation for eternity.³⁵ For her, God’s love, holiness, and power demand awe and reverence. Yet, such a respect does not exclude expressions of thanksgiving,³⁶ gladness,³⁷ cheerfulness,³⁸ grateful praise,³⁹ and joy,⁴⁰ but excludes casualness.⁴¹ Hence respect and reverence for God should impact one’s attitude and behavior during worship.

In contrast to reverence, Ellen White warned people not to emphasize feelings of excitement as a valid indicator of genuine spirituality. During an episode of religious fanaticism in Indiana around 1900, which came to be called the “holy flesh movement,” she warned people that “religious enthusiasm is a dangerous delusion.”⁴² Eyewitness accounts of revival meetings held in this state describe the use of strange, loud instrumental music during services, long prayers, and excited, hysterical preaching.⁴³ People were led to seek an experience of physical demonstration, falling unconscious on the floor. Such people were said to have passed through the Garden of Gethsemane experience and were thus ready for translation.⁴⁴ Mrs. White condemned this fanaticism and the teachings that led to it. “Mere noise and shouting are no evidence of sanctification, or of the descent of the Holy Spirit. Your wild demonstrations create only disgust in the minds of unbelievers.”⁴⁵ “The Holy Spirit never reveals itself in such methods, in such a bedlam of noise. . . . The truth for this time needs nothing of this kind in its work of converting

³⁴*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 492-494; *Messages to Young People*, p. 265.

³⁵*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 491.

³⁶*Amazing Grace*, p. 75; *Lift Him Up*, p. 254.

³⁷*Medical Ministry*, p. 213.

³⁸*Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 179.

³⁹*Child Guidance*, p. 148.

⁴⁰*Child Guidance*, p. 524; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 298; *Desire of Ages*, pp. 769-770.

⁴¹*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 491.

⁴²Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White*, vol. 5, *The Australian Years* (), p. 105.

⁴³In a letter to Ellen White, Stephen Haskell described what he saw in Indiana. “There is a great power that goes with the movement that is on foot there. It would almost bring anybody within its scope, if they are at all conscientious, and sit and listen with the least degree of favor, because of the music that is brought to play in the ceremony. They have an organ, one bass viol, three fiddles, two flutes, three tambourines, three horns, and a big bass drum, and perhaps other instruments which I have not mentioned. They are as much trained in their musical line as any Salvation Army choir that you ever heard. In fact, their revival effort is simply a complete copy of the Salvation Army method, and when they get on a high key, you cannot hear a word from the congregation in their singing, nor hear anything, unless it be shrieks of those who are half insane. I do not think I overdraw it at all” (S. N. Haskell to Ellen G. White, Sept. 25, 1900, in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White*, vol. 5, *The Australian Years* [], p. 102).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 100-102; *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 31

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

souls. A bedlam of noise shocks the senses and perverts that which if conducted aright might be a blessing. The powers of satanic agencies blend with the din and noise, to have a carnival, and this is termed the Holy Spirit's working."⁴⁶

III. Elements of Worship

Although Ellen White never used the word "liturgy" in her published writings, she nonetheless gave some specific counsels regarding the need for order in worship and its various parts. The liturgical model that she was familiar with and upheld is the traditional Protestant hymn-based worship, the same one favored by numerous other Christian churches in the nineteenth century. This service gave prominence to the preaching of the word of God, and included extemporaneous "heart-felt" prayers, congregational singing of hymns, music, and sometimes personal testimonies. Typically, this service was described as informal and more "Spirit-led" as it excluded elements found in more formal, liturgical services of mainline denominations. These formal elements shun by Adventists included formal sermons, prayers from liturgical books, and even a weekly recitation of the Lord's prayer, responsive readings, and formal responses from the congregation.

Need of Order

Building on the typology between worship services in the Old Testament and those in the Christian church, Ellen White saw an intimate connection between the need for reverence and the need for order. In 1889 in a testimony titled "Behavior in the House of God," she wrote, "It is too true that reverence for the house of God has become almost extinct. Sacred things and places are not discerned; the holy and exalted are not appreciated." She wondered whether the cause of this development might be in "the want of fervent piety in our families" or "because the high standard of religion is left to trail in the dust." "God gave rules of order, perfect and exact, to His ancient people," she continued. "Has His character changed? Is He not the great and mighty God who rules in the heaven of heavens? Would it not be well for us often to read the directions given by God Himself to the Hebrews, that we who have the light of the glorious truth shining upon us may imitate their reverence for the house of God? We have abundant reason to maintain a fervent, devoted spirit in the worship of God. We have reason even to be more thoughtful and reverential in our worship than had the Jews. But an enemy has been at work to destroy our faith in the sacredness of Christian worship."⁴⁷

Earlier in the same testimony she emphasized that "there should be rules in regard to the time, the place, and the manner of worshiping. Nothing that is sacred, nothing that pertains to the worship of God, should be treated with carelessness or indifference. In order that men may do their best work in showing forth the praises of God, their associations must be such as will keep the sacred distinct from the common, in their minds."⁴⁸

⁴⁶*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 36 (pp. 31-39).

⁴⁷*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 495-496.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 491. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 145-146; *Maranatha*, p. 234.

Although this testimony and others similar in tone may give the impression that she favored a worship service just as formal as those found in mainline denominations, only without the accouterments shun by Adventists, Ellen White allowed for variety in the worship service. At times she recommended that congregations need not have or even expect a sermon every week and that testimony services be held instead of a sermon.⁴⁹ She herself enjoyed participating in such services.⁵⁰

Yet, her statements indicate that she understood that a worship service should be orderly and well prepared. As already mentioned, she did not encourage an approach to worship that emphasizes religious emotions and enthusiasm, loud music or noises, or shouting.⁵¹ In fact, she counseled ministers to “know the value of the inward working of the Holy Spirit upon human hearts.” True ministers, she added, “are content with simplicity in religious services. Instead of making much of popular singing, they give their principal attention to the study of the Word, and render praise to God from the heart. Above the outward adorning they regard the inward adorning, the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit.”⁵² Certainly, Ellen White did not picture worship as a form of entertainment.

Sermon

For Mrs. White the most important part of a worship service is the sermon. “When the word of life is spoken, you should remember that you are listening to the voice of God through His delegated servant.”⁵³ Although much of her counsels on the importance of the sermon were written in the context of discourses presented at evangelistic meetings, her general principles can still apply to the sermon preached during a worship service on Sabbath. She strongly favored Christ-centered,⁵⁴ simple, “short, spiritual, elevated” sermons rather than long ones;⁵⁵ sermons that “influence the people to obey the truth,”⁵⁶ that explain the Word of God to the people⁵⁷ without creating an “excitement of feeling.”⁵⁸ For this element of worship also what matters most is how the people are introduced to the presence of God and not the entertainment of listeners. Thus she deplored sermonic practices that she described as “theatrical” when ministers assume “attitudes and expressions calculated for effect.”⁵⁹

The crucial moment of the worship service is when the word of God is explained. “The hearts of many in the world as well as many church members are hungering for the bread of life and thirsting for the waters of salvation. They are interested in the service of song, but they are not

⁴⁹*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 361; *Evangelism*, p. 348.

⁵⁰*Ellen G. White in Europe*, p. 61.

⁵¹*Evangelism*, p. 597; *Maranatha*, p. 234.

⁵²*Evangelism*, p. 502.

⁵³*Messages for Young People*, p. 266. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 493.

⁵⁴*Gospel Workers*, pp. 153-160.

⁵⁵*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 167-168; *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 337-338, 311; *Evangelism*, pp. 348, 640.

⁵⁶*Selected Messages*, vol. 3, p. 375.

⁵⁷*Evangelism*, p. 153; *Review and Herald*, February 27, 1908.

⁵⁸*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁹*Evangelism*, p. 640.

longing for that or even prayer. They want to know the Scriptures. What saith the Word of God to me? The Holy Spirit is working on mind and heart, drawing them to the bread of life. They see everything round them changing. Human feelings, human ideas of what constitutes religion, change. They come to hear the Word just as it reads.”⁶⁰

Prayer

Ellen White’s counsels regarding prayer during worship services parallel her thought on other elements already mentioned. “True reverence for God is inspired by a sense of His infinite greatness and a realization of His presence. With this sense of the Unseen, every heart should be deeply impressed. The hour and place of prayer are sacred, because God is there; and as reverence is manifested in attitude and demeanor, the feeling that inspires it will be deepened. ‘Holy and reverend is His name,’ [Ps. 111:9] the psalmist declares. Angels, when they speak that name, veil their faces. With what reverence, then, should we, who are fallen and sinful, take it upon our lips!”⁶¹

Hence an attitude of reverence in prayer will manifest itself by avoiding “long,” “prosy,” “tedious,” and “stale” prayers.⁶² “Careless and irreverent expressions” will be replaced with “earnestness” and “simplicity;”⁶³ the “dry, sermonizing manner” will give way to the “heart-felt prayer of faith.”⁶⁴

“There are two kinds of prayer—the prayer of form and the prayer of faith. The repetition of set, customary phrases when the heart feels no need of God, is formal prayer. . . . We should be extremely careful in all our prayers to speak the wants of the heart and to say only what we mean. All the flowery words at our command are not equivalent to one holy desire. The most eloquent prayers are but vain repetitions if they do not express the true sentiments of the heart. But the prayer that comes from an earnest heart, when the simple wants of the soul are expressed just as we would ask an earthly friend for a favor, expecting that it would be granted—this is the prayer of faith.”⁶⁵

Ellen White’s counsels on the importance of kneeling for prayer is also to be understood in the context of showing reverence to God. She counseled that “both in public and in private worship, it is our privilege to bow on our knees before the Lord when we offer our petitions to Him.”⁶⁶ By kneeling before God in worship the Christian shows “dependence upon God” and “reverence and godly fear.”⁶⁷

⁶⁰*Evangelism*, p. 501.

⁶¹*Gospel Workers*, p. 178.

⁶²*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 70; *ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 64; *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 583; *Gospel Workers*, p. 176.

⁶³*Early Writings*, p. 70; *Gospel Workers*, p. 177-178.

⁶⁴*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 581; *Gospel Workers*, p. 177.

⁶⁵*My Life Today*, p. 19.

⁶⁶*Gospel Workers*, p. 178; *Prophets and Kings*, p. 48.

⁶⁷*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 312.

On one occasion, while attending a worship service at which she was to speak, Ellen White rebuked a young minister when she realized he was going to offer prayer standing. “But as I beheld him standing upright upon his feet while his lips were about to open in prayer to God, my soul was stirred within me to give him an open rebuke. Calling him by name, I said, ‘Get down upon your knees.’ This is the proper position always.”⁶⁸ Many people have taken this earnest counsel to mean that prayer should always be offered while kneeling. While there are numerous statements from her writings that emphasize the need for kneeling in prayer⁶⁹ that Ellen White did not intend to teach that on every occasion we must kneel is made clear both by her words and her example. To her there was not time or place where a silent prayer was not appropriate whether on the busy streets or during a business meeting.⁷⁰ Her family testified that in her home people only bowed their heads at meal times and not their knees. She was not known to kneel for the benediction at the close of services she attended. In her public ministry and during evangelistic meetings there were times when she stood for prayer and invited the congregation to stand also. In her later years, because of age and arthritis, she did not kneel for prayer during worship services.⁷¹ Hence, her counsel on kneeling seems to have its principal application in the worship services in church and private devotions at home. Ellen White wished to teach the importance of showing proper respect, honor and reverence to God and kneeling in prayer is for her the most obvious manner to do this.⁷²

Music

Music and singing also form an important part of a worship service. As “music forms a part of God’s worship in the courts above,” Ellen White stated, “we should endeavor, in our songs of praise, to approach as nearly as possible to the harmony of the heavenly choirs. . . . Singing, as a part of religious service, is as much an act of worship as is prayer.”⁷³ The theological principle guiding her thoughts on music and singing are similar to what we have seen regarding other elements of worship. The order and harmony found in heaven and in the sanctuary services in the Old Testament are faithful and reliable guidelines for the Christian worship service.⁷⁴ Thus, a song service should be well directed and congregational singing should be “sweet [and] simple.”⁷⁵ “It is not loud singing that is needed, but clear intonation, correct pronunciation, and distinct utterance.”⁷⁶ “Those who make singing a part of divine worship should select hymns with music appropriate to the occasion, not funeral notes, but cheerful, yet solemn melodies.”⁷⁷

Ellen White also emphasized the special role of music in the worship service. “Music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God.”⁷⁸ In this context, she did not oppose the use of

⁶⁸*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 311.

⁶⁹See the compilation of some of her statements found in *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, pp. 312-316.

⁷⁰*Steps to Christ*, p. 99; *Gospel Workers*, p. 258; *Ministry of Healing*, pp. 510-511.

⁷¹See *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, pp. 266-270.

⁷²*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, pp. 314-315.

⁷³*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 594. See also *Education*, p. 168.

⁷⁴See *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 145-146.

⁷⁵*Evangelism*, pp. 506, 509.

⁷⁶*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 143.

⁷⁷*Signs of the Times*, June 22, 1882; *Evangelism*, p. 508.

⁷⁸*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 594.

musical instruments to accompany the singing or to fill the worship service with “beauty” and “pathos” to lift the thoughts toward heaven.⁷⁹

Church Ordinances

The ordinances of the church form another important element of worship. Mrs. White understood that Jesus instituted three ordinances for the church: baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the foot washing service, and that each “should be so conducted as to be uplifting in its influence.”⁸⁰ Although baptism is not necessarily a regular element of a worship service, since it is often administered at other times during the week, the ordinances of foot washing and the Lord’s Supper are traditionally held during a worship service on Sabbath.⁸¹

Mrs. White understood there is a biblical and theological connection between the Passover and the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. “The passover pointed backward to the deliverance of the children of Israel, and was also typical, pointing forward to Christ, the Lamb of God, slain for the redemption of fallen man. The blood sprinkled upon the door-posts prefigured the atoning blood of Christ, and also the continual dependence of sinful man upon the merits of that blood for safety from the power of Satan, and for final redemption. Christ ate the passover supper with his disciples just before his crucifixion, and the same night, instituted the ordinance of the Lord’s supper, to be observed in commemoration of his death. The passover had been observed to commemorate the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt. It had been both commemorative and typical. The type had reached the antitype when Christ, the Lamb of God without blemish, died upon the cross. He left an ordinance to commemorate the events of his crucifixion.”⁸²

Furthermore, in the same sense that the Passover was pointing forward to the first Advent of Christ, “the Lord’s supper was given to the disciples to be celebrated till Christ should come the second time, with power and great glory.” This eschatological aspect of the Lord’s Supper “is the

⁷⁹*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 71; *Evangelism*, p. 150. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 62; *ibid.*, vol 9, p 144; *Evangelism*, pp. 503-504.

⁸⁰*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 97. Although traditionally Protestant churches have accepted only baptism and the Lord’s Supper as ordinances or sacraments, Seventh-day Adventists have considered the foot washing service preceding the Lord’s Supper as a third ordinance. In her discussion of this service in *The Desire of Ages* Ellen White referred to foot washing as an ordinance. “Now, having washed the disciples’ feet, He said, ‘I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.’ In these words Christ was not merely enjoining the practice of hospitality. More was meant than the washing of the feet of guests to remove the dust of travel. Christ was here instituting a religious service. By the act of our Lord this humiliating ceremony was made a consecrated *ordinance*. It was to be observed by the disciples, that they might ever keep in mind His lessons of humility and service” (*Desire of Ages*, p. 650, emphasis added; cf. *Evangelism*, pp. 275-276; *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 1138-1139; see also the six-part series “The Lord’s Supper and the Ordinance of Feet-Washing,” in *Review and Herald*, May 31 to July 5, 1898).

⁸¹In Ellen White’s time the Lord’s Supper was often held either on Sabbath afternoon or on Sunday during a quarterly meeting (*Review and Herald*, July 3, 1888; *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 21, p. 119; *Ellen G. White in Europe*, p. 117).

⁸²*Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 201. See also *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 539; *Evangelism*, p. 273.

means by which he [Christ] designs that the great deliverance wrought out for us as the result of his sacrifice shall be kept fresh in our minds.”⁸³

According to Ellen White, the Lord’s Supper was instituted for all time and for all places⁸⁴ and it should not be observed “only occasionally or yearly, but more frequently than the annual Passover.”⁸⁵ She also understood that the elements used during the service “represent the broken body and spilled blood of the Son of God.” Thus, she believed that the only adequate symbols of the Lord’s Supper include “nothing fermented” and “only the pure fruit of the vine and the unleavened bread.”⁸⁶

First “given for the benefit of Christ’s disciples,” the ordinance of foot washing was also instituted for the “benefit of all who should believe in Christ” and for the reconciliation of one with another.⁸⁷ “Whenever it is celebrated, Christ is present by His Holy Spirit.”⁸⁸ Preceding the Lord’s Supper, foot washing is not merely a form,⁸⁹ but it is a ceremony in which “children of God are brought into a holy relationship, to help and bless each other.”⁹⁰ Also called the service of humility,⁹¹ “this ordinance is to encourage humility” in the church by following the example of Jesus; “it is to make tender our hearts toward one another” and to test our humility and faithfulness.⁹² Moreover, this ceremony intends to keep fresh in our remembrance that the redemption of God’s people was purchased upon conditions of humility and continual obedience upon their part.”⁹³ As with the other ordinances, foot washing does not cleanse away one’s sin but is meant as a test of the cleansing of one’s heart. “If the heart was cleansed, this act was all that was essential to reveal the fact.”⁹⁴

Although Ellen White used the word “sacrament” in reference to the Lord’s Supper and the foot washing service one should note carefully that her usage of the word is not done within a sacramental theology.⁹⁵ There are basically three views regarding the role played by the rites of the church in conveying salvation. A first view holds that salvation is transmitted and received through the sacraments of the church. Perhaps the clearest and most complete expression of this view is that of the Roman Catholic Church for which the rites of the church are acts necessary for the justification and salvation of the sinner. These rites are actual means of grace, of conveying the saving grace of God to the sinner. A second view holds that the sacraments are signs of the fulfilment of the new covenant as circumcision and Passover were in the Old Testament. This

⁸³*Review and Herald*, November 4, 1902. See also *Desire of Ages*, pp. 652-653.

⁸⁴*Evangelism*, pp. 275-276.

⁸⁵*The Faith I Live By*, p. 302.

⁸⁶*Review and Herald*, June 7, 1898.

⁸⁷*Evangelism*, p. 275; *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 202.

⁸⁸*Evangelism*, p. 275.

⁸⁹*Evangelism*, p. 274.

⁹⁰*Desire of Ages*, p. 651.

⁹¹*Evangelism*, p. 278.

⁹²*Review and Herald*, May 31, 1898; *Evangelism*, p. 275; *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 202.

⁹³*Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 202.

⁹⁴*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1138. In her published writings, Ellen White does not make a theological connection between the ordinance of foot-washing and baptism, nor does she imply that foot-washing is a renewing of baptismal vows.

⁹⁵See for example *Desire of Ages*, p. 650-660.

view held by many Christians within the Reformed tradition holds that the sacraments are necessary in order for a Christian to be part of the family of God. The third view holds that salvation is transmitted and received by the Word of God. This view is held by most Evangelical Christians and affirms that the rites of the church are visible representations or symbols of God's grace but not conveying grace as such. Grace is only conveyed by the Word of God received through faith. This view describes the rites of the church as ordinances.

Ellen White's understanding of these ceremonies is clearly within this third view which is traditionally called the Zwinglian view. She understood the three ordinances to be illustrations or memorials of the events of salvation history. As such these ceremonies do not impart justifying or sanctifying grace to the participants. Justification and sanctification are accomplished only by the grace of God accepted through faith by the believer. It is the Word of God that saves people not participation in a ceremony. The emblems of the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine, are symbols of Christ's death on the cross and tokens of salvation; they are not his real body and blood. Christ's presence is felt through the Holy Spirit during the ceremony, not received through the emblems. The following two examples illustrate Ellen White's usage of the word sacrament as a synonym for ordinance and that clearly her emphasis is on the symbolic character of the ceremony. "The administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is for the purpose of making a forcible *illustration* of the infinite sacrifice made for a sinful world, and for us individually, as a part of that great whole of fallen humanity, before whose eyes Christ has evidently been set forth crucified among them."⁹⁶ "The *symbols* of the Lord's house are simple and plainly understood, and the truths represented by them are of the deepest significance to us. In instituting the sacramental service to take the place of the Passover, Christ left for His church a *memorial* of His great sacrifice for man. 'This do,' He said, 'in remembrance of Me.' This was the point of transition between two economies and their two great festivals. The one was to close forever; the other, which He had just established, was to take its place, and to continue through all time as the *memorial* of His death."⁹⁷

One last important point to mention regarding the Lord's Supper is Ellen White's emphasis on open communion. "Christ's example [of serving bread and wine to Judas] forbids exclusiveness at the Lord's supper," she stated categorically. "It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches. But beyond this none are to pass judgment. God has not left it with men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions. For who can read the heart? Who can distinguish the tares from the wheat?"⁹⁸ "There may come in among you those who are not in heart united with truth and holiness, but who may wish to take part in these services. Forbid them not."⁹⁹

Conclusion

Ellen White's counsels on worship and liturgy are based upon a few basic biblical principles she derived from the Old Testament sanctuary services and from heavenly scenes of

⁹⁶*Review and Herald*, June 28, 1898, emphasis added.

⁹⁷*Review and Herald*, June 22, 1897, emphasis added; *Evangelism*, pp. 273-274.

⁹⁸*Desire of Ages*, p. 656.

⁹⁹*Evangelism*, p. 277.

worship she saw in visions. From these principles a theology of worship emerges that centers around three key concepts. Worship is first focused on who God is as Creator and Redeemer and knowing God is therefore crucial to genuine worship. Second, it is also in one's heart that God is worshiped. Worship is foremost a spiritual relationship between God and the believer and as it is expressed either in private or in public, it becomes the outward expression of this internal relationship. Hence, all aspects of one's personal life should reflect this relationship with God.

Reverence for God and sacred things is a third key concept. Because God is our Creator and Redeemer, Ellen White understood that Christians should approach worship with a sense of reverence, respect and honor. In her view, casual, superficial, and insouciant attitudes toward worship show disrespect to the Creator. Joy, gratefulness, and praise are all worshipful qualities to be encouraged. Hence, what we do and how we behave during worship in the house of God is part of growing in grace and may require polishing the rough edges of our character in the sanctification process.

Another important concept is order. According to Ellen White the various elements of Christian worship should be characterized by order, with adequate organization and preparation. As opposed to chaos and bedlam, worship should be marked by decorum and respect. Although one should shy away from formalism, worship should nonetheless be carefully attended to. All this stems from the concept that God is a God of order and humans who approach him in worship should do so appropriately.

There are certainly, in my opinion, some trends and practices in modern forms of worship that seem to be in conflict with Ellen White's understanding of guiding principles of Christian worship. Lack of reverence for the place of worship, insouciance and lightheartedness are all attitudes that demand some careful reflection as well as the use of loud music simply for the sake of making a "joyful noise" and an entertainment approach to worship that is more focused on human needs than on the spiritual presence of God.

If Ellen White's counsels are understood around these key concepts, her understanding of worship can contribute immensely to the ongoing discussions in Adventism and Christianity. I believe her foremost concern which shaped her counsels and theology was to help Christians be ready to "appreciate a pure and holy heaven, and be prepared to join with the worshipers in the heavenly courts above, where all is purity and perfection, where every being has perfect reverence for God and His holiness."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 500.