The Church and Worship

C. Raymond Holmes

Introduction

James F. White observes: "Take away Christian worship, and it is hard to conceive of Christianity as long enduring."[1] If this be true of Christianity in general, it is certainly true of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in particular.

Because the Adventist Church has been charged with a unique ministry for a specific time in history, the rationale for its worship is significantly related to that time and that uniqueness. In order to maintain its vitality and to discharge faithfully its ministry in the end time, the church must insist upon the maximum use of Scripture, active congregational participation, and a theocentric focus in its public worship.

The early Christian believers used the Scriptures in their corporate worship life; the historical narratives especially recounted the mighty acts of God. These accounts inspired praise. Such a use of Scripture built the faith of the believing community, particularly in times of difficulty and persecution. That need is acute today as well.

To be assured of the strong impact of the Word of God, I suggest that more than one Bible passage be read during the service: such as an OT text, an Epistle and a Gospel text from the NT. Carefully chosen, they should support in a harmonious manner the Sabbath worship theme. The sermon may be based on one or all three of the Scripture lessons.

Divine worship is not to be conceived as a form of religious entertainment in which the action takes place "up in front," and the congregation remains passive. Congregational passivity prompts the pastor to think in terms of performance: platform and audience functioning in an atmosphere of religious hype. Everything would have to be "exciting" and/or "special," and worship would become more and more secularized and manipulative.

Not to recognize forms of communication, other than verbal, as vital components of the complete worship experience is "an expensive heresy that may well be robbing many a church of its spiritual assets."[2] Congregational passivity is also questionable in that it creates a vacuum that may then be filled by emotionalism and fanaticism.

In harmony with Revelation 14:6-7, authentic Adventist worship is decidedly theocentric. Whereas anthropocentric worship encourages unrestrained emotionalism, theocentric worship produces the conviction of Isaiah: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:5, NIV). Rather than follow the pressures of culture the church is challenged to remain faithful to biblical norms, especially the proclamation of the Word of God, together with the praise response of the worshiping congregation.

---

1 James F. White, *New Forms of Worship* (Nashville, 1971), 52.

2 Ronald Allen and Gordon Borror, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missina Jewel* (Portland:, 1982), 9. See also Robert Webber, "Worship: A methodology for Evangelical Renewal," *TSF Bulletin*, September-October, 1983, 8.

Worshipers Identified

End-Time Followers of Christ

A vivid description of the true end-time worshipers of God (Rev 14:1-5) is found between the final persecuting scenes of Revelation 13:11-17 and the call to worship in Revelation 14:6-7. The call to worship is given through this specific people, identified and described in the passage. They are gathered on Mt. Zion, a "symbol of rejoicing and security"[3] as well as a place of revelation.[4] They are with the Lamb, indicating "triumph over the beast and his image."[5] They are identified as God's people, the redeemed and faithful remnant who have His name written on their foreheads (cf. Deut 6:8), suggesting continual praise.

In contrast with the blasphemy of the beast (Rev 13:5-6), sounds of singing come from the 144,000.[6] They sing a new song of praise, triumph, and victory. That which is "new" are the events of sacred history directly related to the life and ministry of Christ: His birth, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and promise to return. Only the redeemed can sing the new song. The sound of praise they make is like the orchestrated blend of the melodious harp, an instrument uniquely adapted to the praise of God (Pss 149:3; 150:3).

Characteristics of End-Time Followers

The new song is sung to God, not to humanity, and extols redemption by grace, newness, and transformation. Newness of life is indicated by the fact that the singers are pure and undefiled. They have not committed spiritual fornication/adultery with "the great prostitute" (17:1), "Babylon the Great" (18:2ff.).[7] They have cast off idolatry and refuse to adore or follow "the beast[s]" (13:2, 11). Spiritual "virgins" do not yield to the temptation of spiritual sensuality and are "offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb" (14:4).

The redeemed themselves are the ultimate offering to God (14:4). The supreme act of worship is total surrender of being and life to God, to be used redemptively in the world (cf. Rom 12:1). Tangibly, this means obeying the commandments of God and remaining faithful to Jesus Christ (14:12). To be "offered as firstfruits" may mean willingness to pay the ultimate price for adherence to the truth—sacrificial people in the final sense.

Because they serve God, they do not blur distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong: "No lie was found in their mouths" (14:5). They proclaim no false prophecies, they live and speak the truth because they are blameless (*amōmos*, without blemish), uncontaminated by false ideas and ways of life. They allow God's commandments, His revealed will, to establish their beliefs and lifestyle.

The followers of the Lamb are distinguished by their possession of the truth, which is the absence (not just the opposite) of falsehood. They will have nothing to do with falsehood, not even a mixture of truth and falsehood (cf. Zeph 3:9-14). All idolatry is considered as spiritual fornication

---

3 J. Massynyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, AB (Garden City, NY, 1975), 233.

4 Cf. Heb 12:1-29, esp. vs. 22: "But you have come to Mount Zion to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly" (NIV).

5 *The SDA Bible Commentary* 7 (Washington, DC, 1980), 825.

6 The 144,000 is an allusion to the OT remnant which has been redeemed and protected by God to reestablish the nation and deliver her from all enemies preparatory to the day of wrath. See Obadiah 16-17; Joel 3; Jer 2:2-3, 23; Zeph 3:12-13.

7 All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

and adultery (Deut 12:2; cf. Jer 2:20). After all, the remnant people were promised that their "sins would all be forgiven (Jer 50:20), they would be found without iniquity (Jer 50:20; Isaiah 4:2-5), and free from all lies (Zeph 3:13)."[8]

Thus, Revelation 14:1-5 identifies the people to whom and through whom the call to worship God comes in a crisis time. They are in the position and condition to receive and proclaim the message to worship God and the Lamb. They desire to do so, love to do so. They are not looking for the sacred in the secular, but love the sacred for its own sake.

The Call to Worship

Centrality of Worship

The call to worship is given by the first angel in Revelation 14:6-7, and is addressed to a humanity that is idolatrous and superstitious, seduced by the beast and the false prophet (Rev 13:3-8, 11-17). The call to worship God is seen in contrast with worship of the beast and its image (cf. 14:9), the ultimate transgression of God's commandments.

The message of the first angel involves far more than a simple announcement that "the hour of his judgment has come" (14:7). It declares what the whole world, especially the church, should be doing in light of that fact: "Fear God and give him glory." The outcome of proclaiming the "eternal gospel" results in the increase of those who worship God. Evangelism "is the extension of the church's worship life into the world."[9]

Therefore, the primary activity of the remnant church, and its most distinguishing mark, is worship. Seventh-day Adventists are people of submission and of praise. They are a people called out to "proclaim my glory among the nations" (Isa 66:19).

Revelation 14:7 provides additional and specific content of the eternal gospel as it impinges upon the ministry of the last-day church and upon the world at the time that church ministers. Verse 7 is a continuation and enlargement of verse 6. The eternal gospel to be preached by the end-time church in the last days of earth's history is a specific invitation to "fear" God, to give "glory" to God, and to "worship" God, precisely because the hour of His "judgment has come."[10]

Theocentric Worship

The two fundamental expressions of worship are "fear" God, and give "glory" to God. The first has ethical/moral overtones and obligations involving obedience as the evidence of faith. The second has liturgical overtones involving the act of worship itself for individuals and for the corporate body of believers known as the remnant. In this last connection it is important to note that the Bible recognizes no such thing as a remnant person, only a remnant people. The remnant is a corporate concept.

---

8 C. Mervyn Maxwell, "The Remnant in Adventist History" (unpublished manuscript, 1989), 8.

9 C. Raymond Holmes, *Sing a New Song* (Berrien Springs, MI, 1984), 141.

10 See Willem Altink, "1 Chronicles 16:8-36 As Literary Source for Revelation 14:6-7," *AUSS*, vol. 22, no. 2, Summer 1984, 187-96; and "Theological Motives for the Use of 1 Chronicles 16:8-36 As Background for Revelation 14:6-7," *AUSS*, vol. 24, no. 3, Autumn 1986, 211-21, for a discussion of these four terms. Whether 1 Chr 16:8-36 was consciously used by the writer of Revelation as a literary source or background is debatable, however the parallels are striking and we are indebted to Altink for calling them to our attention.

To "fear" God has individual consequences in terms of salvation, and to give "glory" to God has corporate consequences in terms of the church's mission— that which it is sent into the world to be and to do.

The call to worship is theocentric; there is no trace of anthropocentricity. It is God who is to be feared, to be worshiped, to whom glory is to be given, not man. The worship service is primarily an occasion for God to speak, to which His people respond.

Nowhere is the great controversy between God and Satan more manifest, more dramatized, than in the worship of the last-day church. It is in direct contrast, conflict, with that of earthly states and apostate ecclesiastical organizations. This is why worship is a political as well as religious act, challenging all who would usurp the place and authority of God. Observing the Seventh-day Sabbath faithfully is a part of this challenge.

This worship by God's people has cosmic impact in that ultimately all powers and principalities will bow and confess the Lordship of Christ (Phil 2:9-11). It "opens the door to admit the last things, and already participates, in its infirmity and stammering imperfection, in what will one day take place, and is already taking place, before the throne of God."[11]

Congregational Praise

A Christian congregation's praise is participation with all the saints in the singing of the new song, the song of Moses and the Lamb. When the church praises Lord and Lamb, she especially enters the heavenly sanctuary by faith and joins the heavenly host in the new song. Praise is the "medium of perfect communion between God and creature."[12]

Praise anticipates a perfect relationship in which both the human struggle against sin and resistance to the work of the Spirit is ended because of the victory of Christ (Gal 5:13-25). Nothing is there to hinder the expression of that relationship in praise. Human needs are no longer foremost in the worshiper's mind. The worshiper is able to concentrate fully and completely upon offering Lord and Lamb the praise due to them for the victory they have made possible. There is nothing more to do except to glorify the Deity who have done all. Heaven's work has been finished on earth; it has produced the fruit of full salvation and restoration.

Praise stands "at the end of all struggle" and is a "hymn of victory."[13] Praise is the church's last word about God, "an end-time sign, indicating that God will one day be all in all."[14] No wonder so much praise is found in the Bible's last book![15]

Rejecting False Worship

In order to worship God fully and freely, in order to worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), God's people must recognize Babylon's fallenness and "come out of her" (Rev 18:4) so they will not "share in her sins." The major sin is the proclamation of "a false god winning people to worship him by means of a false message preached by a false church to the whole world. . . . Heaven

11 Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis, 1968), 207.
12 Ibid, 210.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 211.
15 See Rev 1:6; 4:9-11; 5:12-13; 7:12; 11:13; 14:7; 15:4; 19:1, 7.

sees the situation as a divine opportunity and as a prelude to the return of the Lord to earth."[16] In addition, the message of Revelation 14:9-11 is a dire warning to those who continue to worship the false god.

Call to Commitment

Verse 12 further identifies the true worshipers of God. It indicates that the situation (described in the previous verses) "calls for patient [steadfast] endurance," like that of an Olympic athlete. There is no yielding in the time of crisis; instead a stubborn, single-minded purpose prevails. Such endurance in the face of spiritual adultery and militant religious apostasy is accepted even unto death (vs. 13; cf. 12:11). These people are spoken of as "blessed" dead, admonished to "be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (2:10).

Distinctions between Revelation 13 and 14 are clear and unambiguous. They call for decisive action, for clear-cut decisions based upon revealed truth, not upon the ideas of men which often blur distinctions and accommodate a "characteristic vice of all idolatry and worldliness."[17] Revelation calls for a mature religious faith that is willing to pay the price of such distinction.

We cannot act on the basis of ambiguous and uncertain religious beliefs. The Christian faith is not simply one among a smorgasbord of religions, all of which are valid. It is only the church with a certain and explicit message that has the right, the authority, the audacity, to call people to decision and action.

Judgment Hour

This is especially relevant and critical when final judgment is imminent and Heaven's court is in session (Dan 7:9-10; Rev 14:7). It is in the context of such a cosmic condition that the Creator calls unequivocally for worship, expressed in total loyalty to Himself and His revealed truth, no matter what the cost. It is the consciousness of the time of judgment that moves believers to fear, glorify, and worship God. To lose that consciousness is to lose motivation for worship and mission on the part of the very church to which, and through which, the call is made. That consciousness ought to accomplish for the church what all the years of formation and reformation did only partially: a total spiritual surrender to Lord and Lamb demonstrated in consistent individual and corporate worship and living.

Confessing the Faith

There can be no compromise with evil on the part of the eschatological church, no truce with the devil. The Christian community has been charged by its Lord to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). God always intended for the church to be an invasion force, permeating the culture and its institutions.

The church does this primarily by its confession concerning Jesus Christ as Lord (Phil 2:11; 1 Cor 12:3), as Messiah (l John 5:1), and as Son of God (1 John 4:15). Such confessions anger the nations (Rev 11:18), and enrage the "dragon" who makes war against "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 12:17). In the affirmation "Jesus is Lord"

16 Holmes, *Sing a New Song*, 40.
17 *IB* 12 (New York, 1957), 592.

(1 Cor 12:3) is bound up the content of the church's confession, proclamation, and motivation for worship and mission. It is the supreme challenge to any other deity or authority.

The response of God's people in this hour is to worship Him more fervently, in dedicated obedience and joyful praise. They pray to Him, eagerly listen to His Word, and sing hymns of praise to Him. In the "hour of his judgment" the opinions and philosophies of men do not stand the test of reliability, but the people of God rest their case on the surety of the ark of the covenant.

To be sure, the Christian gives glory to God by an obedient life, but there is more than an ethical/moral dimension to this call to worship. The call to worship is a call to praise.

Praise in Worship

Old Testament

While there are common elements, there are also distinct differences between Old and New Testament worship, largely due to the historical events which informed that worship and elicited praise.[18]

False Worship Rejected

A major crisis of worship, initiated by King Nebuchadnezzar, took place during the Babylonian captivity. The king's heralds announce that at a given signal the assembly will "fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace" (Dan 3:5-6).

Three young Jews courageously refuse that call to a false worship. Their answer, "we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:18), infuriated the king. His authority challenged, the king orders the three men thrown into the furnace from which they are rescued by divine grace. God uses the opportunity to reveal that He is the true God who alone is to be worshiped.

Previous Religious Training

What was the worship tradition that inspired such courage, conviction, and praise?

Reason for Israel's existence. The nation of Israel was established for the purpose of worshiping and giving glory to God (Isa 43:21).

Deliverances recounted. The corporate memory of deliverances was part of the worship tradition. No doubt the three brave young men remembered the response of Moses and the Israelites after their rescue at the Red Sea, how they sang a song of praise and glory to God for His triumph (Exod 15:1-2).

Creator's powers. The corporate memory of God's act of creation also formed part of Hebrew worship tradition. When the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem, a great celebration was planned. King David wrote a psalm for the occasion, a call to sing the praise of the Lord for His wonderful acts in history. Eleven of the 29 verses praise the Lord for His creative power and activity (1 Chr 16:23-33).

Religious commemorations. The major festivals kept the worship tradition alive. The Sabbath, the Day of Atonement, together with all the other festivals, were days of "sacred assembly"

18 Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 30.

(Lev 23:3-37). They were "appointed" festivals and "lasting ordinances" (Lev 23:2, 14). God was present in the worship activities of the covenant community. Material elements and actions that were part of worship, served as the means by which the congregation remembered and reenacted the events of redemptive history.

Confessions of faith. The praise confessions of Israel rang in the ears of the three courageous young Jews. For example, the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4, NIV), was a confessional declaration of praise, made in response to the Ten Commandments and elicited by the recognition of God's mighty acts. There was also confession in the form of historical recital, not only by word but by ceremony/ritual, such as that connected with observing the Passover.[19]

Songs of praise. Songs of praise played a vital part in the preservation of corporate memory for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Such as God's victory during Judah's battle against the armies of Moab, Ammon, and Mount Seir, in response to the song of faith sung by His people (2 Chr 20:1-29). It is a story of victory to be recounted over and over by God's remnant people, a call to praise God in the midst of the battle against apostasy. Meeting the enemy with the choir is the most appropriate strategy for victory in spiritual warfare against overwhelming odds.

New Testament

The NT reveals that praise is at the heart of Christian faith and worship as Paul's letter to the Philippians and Revelation 4-5 testify.

The primary focus of Christian prayer is praising and glorifying the Lord (Matt 6:9-10). Petitions are secondary (vss. 11-13). The purpose for NT worship and praise was "so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:6). The early Christians did not sing their songs alone. The praise of God's redeemed people is in harmony with the activity of our Lord in their midst. The book of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as saying, "In the presence of the congregation I will sing your [God's] praises" (Heb 2:12b). Jesus is the church's example for the singing of praise.

The power inherent in the singing of praise to God was manifest in the experience of Paul and Silas in the Philippian prison. In response to their songs of praise the foundations shook, the door flew open, chains were loosened; the jailer and his whole family were converted and "filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God." (Acts 16:25-34)

Philippians. Paul's letter to the Philippians exudes that kind of praise. Paul prays "with joy" (1:4), admonishing believers to live in anticipation of the return of Christ "to the glory and praise of God" (1:11). He rejoices that Christ is preached in spite of the varying motives of its proclaimers (1:18). He desires that "Christ will be exalted" in his body whether he lives or dies (1:20). His purpose in ministry is to achieve the believers' "joy in the faith" (1:25). Their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord glorifies God (2:11). In worship believers "glory in Christ Jesus" (3:3). However, praising and glorifying the Lord does not mean a settled experience; it means growth: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (3:13-14).

Praise is the "natural language"[20] of the faith life. To live rejoicing in the Lord means that

19 Cf. Exod 12:24-28, 42; 13:8, 14.

20 Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia, 1985), 29.

"the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7). To rejoice in the Lord and exalt His glory is the "only safe context for full and free intellectual and emotional life."[21] The Creator's intended use of the human mind is to think about what is worthy of praise: the truth, the noble, the right, the pure, the lovely, the admirable (4:8).

Contentment relative to material things is one of the consequences of a life of praise, and is only possible "through him who gives me strength" (4:13). This is why Paul could say to the Philippians that "God will meet all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (4:19-20).

What happens to those who do not worship and praise God is described by Paul in graphic terms in Romans 1:18-32. When the fear of God is removed the vacuum is "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity" (vs. 29).

During the time of God's wrath, (described in Revelation 16) following the close of probation, the cruciality of worship and the giving of glory/praise to God is highlighted. How hardened mankind has become when neither God's mercy nor His wrath is able to move people to repentance! Of that reality Revelation 16:9 says, they cursed the name of God, . . . "they refused to repent and glorify him."

Revelation 4-5. In Revelation 4:10 the 24 elders "fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship [*proskuneō*] him." In 5:14, following the hymns of praise, the 24 elders "fell down and worshiped." A literal translation would be "fell down and prostrated themselves." An act of worship is understood.[22] Paul's statement, "he will fall down and worship God" (1 Cor 14:25, NIV), in the context of a lengthy discussion on worship, seems to indicate that prostration was probably part of the worship of the NT church. Apparently the disciples worshiped the risen Christ in the same manner prior to His glorification (Matt 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52).

Why did the Lord's disciples respond to Him in this way? Because, "they saw Him vested with the omnipotence of God. Overwhelmed by this proof of might, they fell down before him and carried out the *proskynesis*, exclaiming: 'Truly You are the son of God!'"[23] Such was Daniel's response when Christ appeared to him and he "was terrified and fell prostrate. . . . with my face to the ground" (Dan 8:17-18). What else does one do in the very presence of divinity? Is not bowing before the Lord the ultimate gesture, sign, testimony, that declares the dominion of Lord and Lamb?

The central issue of worship in the great controversy is crystallized in this kind of adoration the devil sought from Jesus: "All this I will give you . . . if you will bow down and worship [*proskuneō*] me.[24] Prostration, because it is symbolic of repentance and submission, is the control to unrestrained exuberance and emotional expression.

Praise is offered by means of action and language. Revelation 4 and 5 portray a dynamic interplay of word, action, and material symbol.[25] This interplay shapes the worshiper's perception, allowing for a creative and spontaneous response in which action can be as spiritual as words.

To enter the presence of Lord and Lamb in spoken or sung prayer means verbally to adore

21 Ibid, 30.
22 See also Rev 7:11; 11:16; 19:4.
23 Brunner, *Worship*, 211-12.
24 Matt 4:9; Luke 4:7; cf. Rev 9:20 and 13:4, 12.
25 Holmes, *Sing a New Song*, 18-19.

Him, to thank Him for what He is and does, to confess sin and repent in deep humility. It is confession of sin and confession of faith in Christ that give glory to God. The failure to confess sin inhibits praise, just as the confession of faith unleashes praise.

Such Christian prayer has been called the "supreme moral act,"[26] "an attempt to cope with the abundance of God's love."[27] To praise is to want to praise again and again, because it is completely voluntary and elicited by God's love and grace. Giving God glory is a natural and proper response to His goodness. By means of praise the believer joins his life with that of Lord and Lamb and, together with other believers, constructs a "cathedral of sound."[28]

The glorified church, whose worship is portrayed in Revelation 4-5, is portrayed in 7:13-17 as "they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple." They are dressed in white robes and they stand "before the throne and in front of the Lamb" with palm branches in their hands, and they cry out "in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (7:9-10).

Revelation 4-5 indicates that "word and gesture belong together."[29] The words that are spoken, and the actions, all take place in the presence of the Lord and the Lamb. In chapter 4 the Creator Lord is praised and adored. In chapter 5 the Redeemer Lamb is similarly praised and adored. The words and actions acknowledge the Lordship of God over man and all creation. They recount/recite the mighty acts of Lord and Lamb in creating and redeeming the world.

Authentic Christian worship, however, also includes meditative silence. When the congregation is silent before the Lord, the worshipers are able to listen acutely and hear His voice. Some of the most profound and most moving praise is done in an atmosphere of silence.

Words are often inadequate to express praise and adoration by themselves, as is evidenced by the heavenly worship in Revelation 4-5. The entire focus is on the Deity, not on the worshipers. Commenting on these chapters, Robert Webber observes that "worship is a ministry to God."[30]

We can only be impressed by the theocentric/Christocentric worship in Revelation. It is not man-centered and narcissistic. The Lord and Lamb are at the center—not human feelings, human experience, and human needs. In the contemporary approach it is often an energetic exercise to get people to smile and greet one another Sabbath morning—compulsory friendliness—assuming success to be an indication that everything is spiritually all right.

William Willimon perceptively observes that "Our current backslapping conviviality and chumminess with God would seem strange to those who once stammered and shook before the Divine, falling flat on their faces before God rather than shouting out a hearty 'Good morning!'"[31]

Richard John Neuhous, says

> We should not enjoy such a service because we should resist being infantilized, especially when it comes to the most important activity of life, which is the worship of Almighty God. Hand clapping, knee squeezing, ditty singing, rollicking good fun in the name

26 Millard Lind, *Biblical Foundations for Christian Worship* (Scottsdale, PA, 1973), 40.
27 Hardy/Ford, *Praising and Knowing God*, 1.
28 Ibid, 19-20.
29 Brunner, *Worship*, 212.
30 Robert E. Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail* (Waco, TX, 1985), 40.
31 William Willimon, *The Bible* (Valley Forge, PA 1981), 89.

> of religion is something other than the solemnity of worship. . . . The Christian life is one of growth in the beautiful, as in the good and the true.[32]

There are those who would say that contemporary faith is more mature than that of the ancients; the opposite may actually be the case. We have managed to alter our conception of God from that of the Almighty in the heavens to the "good ole boy," not realizing how much we have contributed to the rotting of the religion of our times. "It is my opinion" said A. W. Tozer, "that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity."[33]

This is even more so in the closing years of the twentieth century. In view of Revelation 4-5 and 14:6-7, Tozer is right in his observation that "the heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian church today is to purify her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him—and of her"[34]

God would have a people who acknowledge the dominion and authority and rule of Lord and Lamb. It is this acknowledgment of dominion and Lordship that unites the remnant church with the triumphant church. In its corporate worship the remnant church enters by faith into the heavenly sanctuary and joins the worship of the angelic beings in anticipation of the great marriage supper of the Lamb at the end of the age (Rev 19:7-9).

Genuine Christian acclamations of praise are not lyrical emotionalism, rather they "bind the congregation to the rule of [the] Lord."[35] Therefore, the proper response of God's people on earth to Revelation 4 (the adoration of the Creator) is the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath; to Revelation 5 (the adoration of the Redeemer) is the living of a transformed life. Both responses acknowledge divine dominion and are acted out in praise. Praise is the most appropriate response to the gospel, as well as the natural consequence of the gospel.

Praise in Contemporary Adventist Worship

Praise in Seventh-day Adventist worship may be critiqued in terms of the significance of song, the theocentric nature of true worship, the evangelistic mission, the preaching of God's Word, the necessity for liturgical balance, the great controversy theme, and the grand climax of human history.

Significance of Song

"The Christian Church was born in song."[36] For the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be without song would be inconsistent with its message. The song it sings grows out of the message it preaches. Congregational singing gathers the spoken word into praise, so that language, race, and culture are transcended, binding together the remnant people more powerfully than the spoken word

32 Quoted by Martin Marty in *Context*, October 1, 1990, 2.
33 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York, 1961), 9-10.
34 Ibid, 12.
35 Brunner, *Worship*, 208.
36 Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, 1964), 39.

alone can do. While the spoken word instructs, the sung word can move the congregation on the deepest levels.

Praise song was an integral part of the loud cry or shout symbolized by the blowing of the shofar in the OT. Matthew, a Jew, testifies that the observance of the Last Supper concluded with the singing of a hymn (Matt 26:30).

Songs are one of the best vehicles for keeping memory alive, and the most effective means to impress the heart with spiritual truth.[37] The church sings its song of praise in an alien land. Its song tells the story of Creation and redemption, and serves to bridge the distance between the then and the now.

The singing of psalms as a regular part of Christian worship was common by the middle of the first century A.D. One person intoned the psalm with the congregation responding after each verse with an acclamation such as *Amen!—Hallelujah!*or *Come, Lord Jesus!* Similar spontaneous responses in contemporary black Adventist worship are in harmony with biblical tradition.

Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian congregation may indicate antiphonal psalm singing among the early Christians. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19-20). Notice that the singing is connected to the giving of thanks (praise) to the Lord. Spiritual songs were possibly "snatches of spontaneous praise."[38]

The temptation today is to move away from this injunction to sing hymns and to adopt religious "pop" songs and music. We must guard against rejecting that which is historical in church music for the contemporary fad of praise choruses. The *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* represents some of the best hymns expressing the doctrines and faith of God's people through the ages.

There are several segments in the NT that are thought to reflect early hymns. These praise and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ.[39] They "have a common pattern of thought" which is the "ringing assurance that Christ is victor over all man's enemies, and is rightly worshiped as the Image of God who is over all."[40]

The fundamental difference between Christian and pagan hymns is that Christian hymns are not simply subjective, emotional expressions, in an entertainment setting. Rather, they have as a major element the confession of sin and of faith in a setting of reverence and adoration. Just like many of the OT psalms, the hymns and songs in the NT recall the mighty acts of the Lord in providing for mankind's redemption. The primary focus is on the confessional, exaltation of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Theocentric Worship

In Seventh-day Adventist worship the center of attention must be the Lord, not the worshiper. To say of worship, "It doesn't meet my needs!" or, "I don't get anything out of it!" suggests that the worshiper is at the center. No wonder God is missed! No wonder so little of real value happens! No wonder churchgoing can become a bore! No wonder God's Word is often buried

37 Hans K. LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms* (Berrien Springs, MI, 1983), 4.
38 Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 47.
39 See John 1:1-14; Rom 11:33-35; Eph 1:3-10; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 1:18-21; Rev 12:10-12.
40 Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 52.

beneath the rubbish of human self-elevation!

Worship is not just another entrée in a smorgasbord of activities planned to meet every possible human need, and usually failing to do so. Failing because the deepest human need is to come into God's presence in faith and submission. Because "the main gift we receive is God,"[41] the meeting of human need is a gracious by-product of theocentric worship.

In the context of the judgment age in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church lives and ministers, a self-centered and humanistic age, the radicality of worship is indicated by Revelation 14:6-7. When it comes to the planning and leading of worship, "the true prophet is more intent on interpreting the nature and working of God than on fulfilling the needs and wishes of the people."[42] Pastoral responsibility demands that a congregation be led to experience the highest, the loftiest, the most majestic, in worship. It should never be tacky, common. A theocentric/Christocentric worship experience that praises Lord and Lamb inevitably results in a renewal of both worship and evangelism.

Evangelistic Mission

Adventist worship deliberately and consciously includes evangelistic elements. When patterned after Revelation 4-5, it exalts the Creator and Redeemer as the central figures in the universe. Worship that actively confesses sin, hears the good news of the gospel, responds in faith, and sings the praise of the Lord and the Lamb is a powerful evangelistic medium, a powerful witness for truth.

The worshiper experiences the mystery of Creation and the passion of the Lamb in the depth of his/her soul, together with the cleansing of sin and rekindling of the God-relationship. It builds the faith of the Adventist believer, and moves the worshiper to service for God in the world. Faith increases by means of praise, as "there is a knowledge of God that can only come in praising Him."[43] Furthermore, worship is evangelistic, because in its context God offers His saving grace to the congregation again and again.

Praise in worship can "provoke a crisis in which one either gives up in despair at what one discovers about oneself or else lays out everything for forgiveness by God and so becomes able to go deeper into love and praise."[44] Evangelism is "the horizontal dimension of praise—the content of praise repeated and explained to others so that they can join the community of praise."[45] For Adventists worship is "as much a passionate expectation of the coming Lord" as it is "thanks and praise for what [has] already happened. The top priority [is] sharing this news, inviting others to take part in this future now" with "complete confidence in God's victory."[46]

If the Christ we follow is not only active in the present but also the One who will determine the future, our praise of Him "will carry with it a prophetic call."[47] Worship that leads to mission is not self-centered and individualistic. Corporate worship is truly missionary and evangelistic in nature. When the church responds to the call to worship, it is enabled to respond to the call to

41 Willimon, *The Bible*, 34.
42 Ibid, 76.
43 Hardy and Ford, *Praising and Knowing God*, 10.
44 Ibid, 15.
45 Ibid, 19.
46 Ibid, 65.
47 Ibid, 66.

evangelize.

The Aramaic expression *maranatha* may be one of the oldest Christian prayers. It is either a plea in the imperative, "Our Lord, come!" or a present declaration "Our Lord has come!" or "is coming!"[48] Both were integral elements of NT faith and worship. The believers of the early church were a worshiping, waiting, working people: worshiping the Lord who had come and was yet to come; waiting for the final coming, and working to spread the good news of both the first advent and Second Advent. God will finish what He began, and believers participate in that finishing by worshiping and evangelizing.

Preaching the Word

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is dedicated to the kind of Scriptural exposition that "organizes our worlds, defines our identities, judges our activities, empowers our witness, publicly exhibits God's promises in Jesus Christ, offers Jesus Christ himself, and evokes our freedom as 'persons' to respond to God or reject him."[49] It is wise to remember that God's speech takes precedence over human response.

The Word of God, read and preached, are the weapons by which God subdues His enemies and frees mankind from bondage. It is the sword in His hand, which He wields until the last day! Apart from this spiritual warfare the Word cannot be understood, for it lays its hearers under obligation, it addresses and arrests, it condemns and comforts. We cannot hear that Word at a safe distance because it speaks of our own existence, of our struggle with sin and death, and of the victory won for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. If we remain neutral under the preaching of the Word, we have ceased to listen.

Christ fights His cosmic battle through and by the Word. Therefore, it must be allowed to dominate and mold the worship service of His church.

Any trend that would unseat preaching as the central act in Adventist worship is equally out of harmony with Revelation 14:6-7. Human experience must never take the place of God's Word in worship, not even mild ecstasy.[50] It is in response to the Word of God, read and preached, that the redeemed sinner praises Lord and Lamb. It is for this reason that praise, liturgically speaking, does not come too early in the worship service. Praise is the climax of a theocentric worship service during which the reasons for praise have first been established. Penitence, in response to God's speech in Scripture and sermon, precedes praise.

Without a perspective of sacred history, reenacted, illustrated, demonstrated, proclaimed in its corporate worship, the Advent movement will become imprisoned within present culture, perhaps even within its own subculture. The present moment in history becomes the norm. The roots of Adventist worship are not in the sixteenth or nineteenth or twentieth centuries, but in the OT and early church practices, particularly as represented by Revelation 4, 5, and 14.

Balanced Worship

It is possible to distort what has been said above concerning praise. Taken out of the context of the preaching of the Word of God, praise can degenerate into uncontrolled emotionalism and

48 Willimon, *The Bible*, 24-25.

49 Steven Franklin, "The Primacy of Preaching," *The Covenant Quarterly*, February 1990, 5.

50 Ibid., 6.

fanaticism. There is ample warning to steer clear of such distortion and degeneration in Adventist worship. Note the following:

"If we work to create an excitement of feeling, we shall have all we want, and more than we can possibly know how to manage. Calmly and clearly 'Preach the word.' We must not regard it as our work to create an excitement."[51] Feelings and emotions must not be permitted to "get the mastery over calm judgment."[52] "Mere noise and shouting are no evidence of sanctification, or the descent of the Holy Spirit."[53] In the context of a statement in which shouting, drums, and dancing are mentioned, we are admonished to give no encouragement to that kind of worship.[54]

Both proclamation and acclamation are major components in the worship of the last-day church as Revelation 14:6-7 indicates. There need be no dichotomy between preaching and praise if they are kept in balance, if care is taken to preach "the old gospel doctrine, sorrow for sin, repentance, and confession"[55] in a praise context of order, discipline, and dignity.[56] The best way to avoid emotionalism, fanaticism, and subjectivism in worship is to give serious and careful attention to the exposition of the Scriptures in preaching, and to balance in the order of service itself.

Satan's plan is to tempt the church to move in the direction of either of two extremes: emotionalism or cold formalism, subjectivism with no objective base or objectivity with no subjective response, pure emotion without the Word, or the Word without praise. When expressions of praise are disallowed in worship, extremes are enticing. The sermon is denigrated, and calls for action are heard, either in the form of elaborate liturgies or for the kind of "celebration" in which shouting, clapping, swaying, and even dancing are encouraged. If crowds are attracted, the church may convince itself they are evidence of growth and spirituality.

Celebration, giving expression to praise in song or testimony, is but one of the vital elements in a balanced and wholistic worship experience. To make it the major element is to dislocate the entire worship service, and to belittle other vital elements such as confession, contrition, thanksgiving, proclamation, teaching, sacraments, testimony, dedication, and sacrifice in giving and in service. Christian worship must take place in a framework of "disciplined liberty."[57] Which means that it is subject to norms and conditions derived from the biblical content of the faith.

It goes without saying, however, that the corporate experience of worship can always be improved in order that it might become more of what it should be. While we seek for worship renewal and improvement, let us do so—ever conscious of the need for balance—with all the essential elements present. Let us not focus on one element to the downgrading of others.

Having said this, perhaps we need to acknowledge the fact that the celebration worship movement within Adventism is calling attention to the need for worship renewal. Not having given worship the attention Revelation 14:6-7 demands, has produced a vacuum. We should not be surprised by what fills it.

But let us be balanced also in our response to this phenomenon. Let us not take the extreme position that because we are living in the antitypical day of atonement, praise and celebration are

51 *Selected Messages*, Book 2, 16.
52 Ibid, 17.
53 Ibid, 35.
54 Ibid, 37.
55 Ibid, 19.
56 Ibid, 35, 41-42.
57 J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York, 1965), 104.

inappropriate. The good news of forgiveness of sin and the promise of the Lord's soon return are certainly cause for rejoicing among God's people, legitimately expressed in worship. Careful consideration, investigation, analysis, and education are required so that extremists do not determine the outcome.

The Great Controversy Truth

It is no accident that Ellen G. White's major contribution to the history of Christian thought is her development of the great controversy theme. This is why the Seventh-day Adventist Church is both phenomenally successful and often agonizingly troubled. One of the fundamental aspects of its mission is to expose the Satanic conspiracy, to bring to light these hidden forces that would inhibit or destroy every vestige of spirituality, and to proclaim the victory of Calvary over those forces.

To attack an enemy is to invite retaliation. When the church does so it becomes vulnerable. Only a dependent bravery would dare such a thing. A bravery arising, not out of awareness of inherent abilities, but out of the consciousness of terrible weakness and total dependence, by faith, upon the One who called the church to its mission and assures it of final victory. It is a bravery received, not achieved, in answer to the supplications of faith, and permits the consciousness that it constitutes the nucleus of a new community who will be faithful as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This consciousness finds its highest expression in world evangelization and mission. The church recognizes God's call to be a worshiping and a loving/sacrificial community, willing to spend the life it has been given for the sake of those who are dying for life. To worship God, the church places itself in the position of receiving, so that it can evangelize from a position of giving, first turning its corporate face to God, who is the source of grace and life and faith, then to the world in loving service.

The controversy between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world is evident in the NT worship material. Recall the response of the church to the release of Peter and John from prison: "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God." They appealed to God whose power was manifest in Creation, asking Him to overrule the earthly forces that "conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed" (Acts 4:27).

The sound of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15 signals the end of the controversy, and announces the final day of deliverance. Heavenly voices declare that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." In response to that resounding declaration of the ultimate victory, the twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship God:

> We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth. (Rev 11:16-19)

Worship is a sacred drama. As such, it is both the proclamation and the acting out of the gospel story that interprets and provides meaning to human existence. "Human life on this earth began with God in worship, and it is to end with God in worship."[58] Just as two Sabbaths are like

58 Holmes, *Sing a New Song*, 30.

two hands enclosing something special, so between the first worship on earth and the last is the whole history of God's praising people.

The fundamental need of the contemporary Adventist worshiper is to be enabled to live faithfully, courageously, and obediently during the time of the great controversy and in the midst of a corrupt world system. Adventist worship meets this spiritual need only when the Lord and the Lamb are its primary focus, when they are glorified, praised, as the only reliable and dependable source of salvation and overcoming grace. "The radical nature of the biblical faith is evident precisely at the point of worship," says Lind.[59]

Perhaps the reason why we do not give glory and praise to God as we should is because "God's grace is no longer gift to us" as Willimon says. It is so utterly expected. "It is our right, our privilege, our achievement. This is the blasphemy against which the prophets spoke."[60]

The struggle of the last-day church is the same as that of ancient Israel and the early church. She wrestles externally with the "Babylon" influence (Rev 14:8; 18:2-5), the forces of evil and apostasy as represented by the beast in Revelation 13, and internally with the preservation of the faith in the face of doubt and skepticism.

Heaven's Victory

The tragic "Fallen! Fallen . . . !" (Rev 18:2) spoken by the angel about the apostate church, and the "Woe! Woe . . . !" (18:10, 16, 19) cried by those on earth who witness her sad demise, are followed by joyous and triumphant "Hallelujahs!" (19:1, 3, 4, 5, 6) from heaven. With a roar like thunder the great hymn is sung in heaven by the redeemed: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants" (19:1-2).

Again they respond! "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever" (19:3).

A voice then comes from the throne bidding the heavenly worshipers to "Praise our God." The response comes again, an immense roaring chorus: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear" (19:6-8).

Could it be that a vital element in the loud cry of Adventist missions is the remnant community preaching and praising Lord and Lamb? The Christian religion is not just about morality and character, it is about joy and praise. Righteousness, peace, and "joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17) are qualities of the kingdom of God. Joy in the Lord is a primary fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

Ellen G. White comments concerning the significance of praise for Seventh-day Adventist worshipers in the great controversy context, and in light of the grand climax: "Praise, like clear-flowing streams, will come from God's truly believing ones."[61]

> The church of God below is one with the church of God above. Believers on the earth and the beings in heaven who have never fallen constitute one church. Every heavenly intelligence is interested in the assemblies of the saints who on earth meet to worship God. In the inner court of heaven they listen to the testimony of the witnesses for Christ in the outer court on earth, and the praise and thanksgiving from the worshipers below is taken up in the

59 Lind, *Biblical Foundations*, 56.
60 Willimon, *The Bible*, 78-79.
61 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church 6* (Mountain View, CA, 1900), 367.

> heavenly anthem, and praise and rejoicing sound through the heavenly courts because Christ has not died in vain for the fallen sons of Adam. . . . Oh, that we could all realize the nearness of heaven to earth! . . . Let us remember that our praises are supplemented by the choirs of the angelic host above.[62]

The Christian church in general, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in particular, was called into existence to be a worshiping community. It is not primarily a social institution, nor a convenient place for people with common concerns to meet. It is the body of Christ created to preach the eternal gospel to all the world, to offer up "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" and to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:5, 9). The church is first of all the servant of God, not of man. The relationship between worship and the grand climax is dramatized by Robert Webber, who writes:

> When we sit at table with our Lord, the church corporately symbolizes the messianic banque—the celebration of the new heavens and the new earth. Thus, worship transports the church from the earthly sphere to the heavens to join in that everlasting worship described by John (see Rev. 4 and 5). In this way the church at worship signals its relationship to the age to come and derives from worship the power to live in this world now—in the tension between the Resurrection and the Second Coming, in the tension between promise and fulfillment.[63]

Joyfully praising God is not always appreciated, even by religious people, as the Lord's disciples discovered. When they were rebuked by the Pharisees for their enthusiasm, Jesus said "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). If God's people do not give "glory" to Him in worship, the stones will.

Perhaps we need to be reminded that the Lord Himself, who even now praises the Father in the midst of the congregation, will one day soon "descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God" (1 Thess 4:16, NASB).

62 Ibid, 366-7.
63 Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 95.