

Principles of Worship and Liturgy

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Many students and church members are bewildered by the multiplicity of Christian styles of worship. Usually, when I hear believers talking about these feelings the conversation ends when someone affirms that the reason why some dislike a form of worship is cultural. Culture shapes by taste. Thus, the reasoning follows, if I accept the new style with time I will come to like it. I am not sure I will like cilantro if I force myself to eat it once a day for the rest of my life. Are worship styles¹ a matter of taste or a matter of principle? Is personal taste a reliable principle to shape our corporate worship style? Are there principles we can use to help us shape our worship and choose what we include in it?

As many believers I have worshiped God since my early youth. When we worship, experience precedes thinking. We relate to the Sabbath in the same way. We experience it according to God's command. We just do it. We do not think about it. Why should we reflect on what we experience? Because Jesus personally prayed to the father that we should "become perfectly one" (John 17:23) as He and the Father are one (22). Thus, when our worship service becomes divisive, we need to reflect about some of the explicit and implicit reasons we have for what we do. I always avoid discussion when arguments and conclusions flow from passions, emotions, and personal preferences. Still, we all need to think and pray about this situation that dishonors God. I hope this article may help us evaluate our

¹ Here I use the generalized misnomer "worship styles." The correct designation for congregational activity styles is "liturgy." We will explain the distinction between worship and liturgy in section 2 below.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

worship and liturgical habits, so we may serve and worship God in Spirit and Truth.

Many Adventists understand worship is what they do on Sabbath during the sermon hour. Moreover, the conviction that the way we worship is cultural is spreading among us. To say that worship styles are “cultural” means that we can use any cultural form accepted by contemporary society. “Worship is about self-expression. Therefore, anything I choose to do to express myself in worship is acceptable before the Lord.” When we address divine worship in this context, we are bound to generate animated disagreement and very little communication. We are understanding worship on a cultural/individualistic basis. Yet, at least in theory, everybody will deny that “everything is acceptable before the Lord.” However, when no clear and permanent parameters are used to evaluate cultural forms, it is impossible to avoid this conclusion in practical life. Obviously, we will not find in human culture permanent parameters to evaluate cultural forms. We should not address the role of culture in ritual formation before we have a clear idea about the permanent principles that should guide the rituals we use in corporate worship. My purpose in this article is to identify some of the permanent guiding principles of biblical worship that should unite Adventist worship around the world and help to evaluate the cultural process of ritual formation and worshiping practice. The questions before us are, where do we find them? What are these permanent principles?

1. Methodology

As Adventists, we should agree that the permanent principles of worship must be biblical (Fundamental Belief 1). After all, we claim Scripture to be the sole rule of doctrine and practice. Yet, since Scripture does not provide us with an explicit list of worship principles, we need to delve into Scripture to identify them. This is the task of Systematic Theology. Adventist Systematic Theology has not developed this issue yet. Consequently, for the purposes of this article I have chosen to research the writings of Ellen White to see whether she discovered in Scripture some

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

permanent biblical principles of worship² that may help us while exegetes and theologians research this issue.

In this article, I use a systematic methodology. Systematic means articulating, interlinking or interfacing. Ellen White was familiar with the systematic approach to Bible study. She knew that “the most valuable teaching of the Bible is not to be gained by occasional or disconnected study. Its great system of truth is not so presented as to be discerned by the hasty or careless reader. Many of its treasures lie far beneath the surface, and can be obtained only by diligent research and continuous effort. The truths that go to make up the great whole must be searched out and gathered up, “here a little, and there a little.” Isaiah 28:10. When thus searched out and brought together, they will be found to be perfectly fitted to one another.”³ In this system we find interlinking principles. “Every principle in the word of God has its place, every fact its bearing. And the complete structure, in design and execution, bears testimony to its Author. Such a structure no mind but that of the Infinite could conceive or fashion.”⁴ Following the systematic method we will discuss some of the principles of worship in their logical interconnections and contexts. Although principles of worship are of the greatest importance for our understanding and adoration of God, they do not stand by themselves. Instead, they depend on broader principles we need to consider to understand worship. Then, with the help of Ellen White, we will explain some of the principles of worship presented in order of influence. We will start with the most general and influential principles of worship, and move on to principles of congregational worship, and liturgy formation.

2. Scripture, Culture, Worship and Liturgy

Before dealing with the principles of Christian worship, we need to gain a working knowledge of the way believers arrive at their conceptions of

² To search Ellen White’s writings I used the CD-Rom with her published works. I searched for the word: “worship” and received 3552 entries. Of course, this number includes many repetitions of the same paragraph in different publications. The actual number, therefore, must be substantially less. In the first 112 entries, I found a number of principles of worship she draws from Scripture that helped me to discover and understand some permanent principles of worship. In this chapter, I will not report about Ellen White’s view on worship.

³ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 123.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 124.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

worship. This knowledge is necessary because Adventists frequently copy their “worship styles” from Protestant denominations as if they could do no harm.⁵ Thus, we need to understand, critically, the origin of the various ‘worship styles’ currently available, and, decide whether we should continue to adopt each new “style” of liturgy evangelicals create, or, should ground our liturgy on scriptural thinking instead. We also need to understand the role that culture plays in the liturgical styles we are copying from other Christian denominations.

Let us start by spelling out the distinction between “worship” and “liturgy” we have already assumed above. The Oxford dictionary defines “worship” as “the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity,”⁶ and, “liturgy” as “a form or formulary according to which public religious worship, especially Christian worship, is conducted.”⁷ In other words, while “worship” names an internal state of human consciousness, “liturgy” designates objective forms and rituals, external to human consciousness. In short, worship is an internal experience that takes place in the inner being of human beings. Liturgy consists in the external forms and rituals believers use in their worship ceremonies.

From this distinction, it follows that much of the discussion about “worship” in Adventism is a quarreling about liturgy and rituals. Confusing worship with liturgy hides the deep spiritual issue of worshiping God. We should not equate worship with liturgy and rituals. We need to understand, then, what worship is, and how it connects to the formalities of liturgy. Perhaps some of the principles of worship Ellen White discusses might assist us to understand the relation between worship and liturgy better.

When we partake in church rituals, we usually think more about how they make us feel than about how they originated. However, subjective personal enjoyment and pastoral success in attracting believers to worship services are not reliable criteria to judge the appropriateness of rituals in public worship. Adventists may be inclined to assume they draw their rituals from Scripture. Clearly, baptism and Holy Communion originate in Scripture. Yet, other things they do in public worship, like the hymns they

⁵ The same uncritical use of cultural forms occurs in Adventist missiology. See for instance Carlos Martin, “C-5 Muslims, C-5 Missionaries or C-5 Strategies?” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17/2, Autumn (2006): 122-34.

⁶ *Oxford Dictionary of English* (CD-ROM by Selectsoft Publishing), s.v., worship.

⁷ *Ibidem*, s.v., liturgy.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

sing, cannot be traced back to a biblical text. Thus culture plays a role in liturgical formation. How can we know, then, if the liturgical forms we create or copy from evangelical denominations are compatible with biblical worship? To answer this question we need to consider briefly, what any liturgical style assumes.

To simplify the explanation of a complex matter, I have drawn a diagram in figure 1 below. I hope it will help readers to understand from where liturgical forms come.

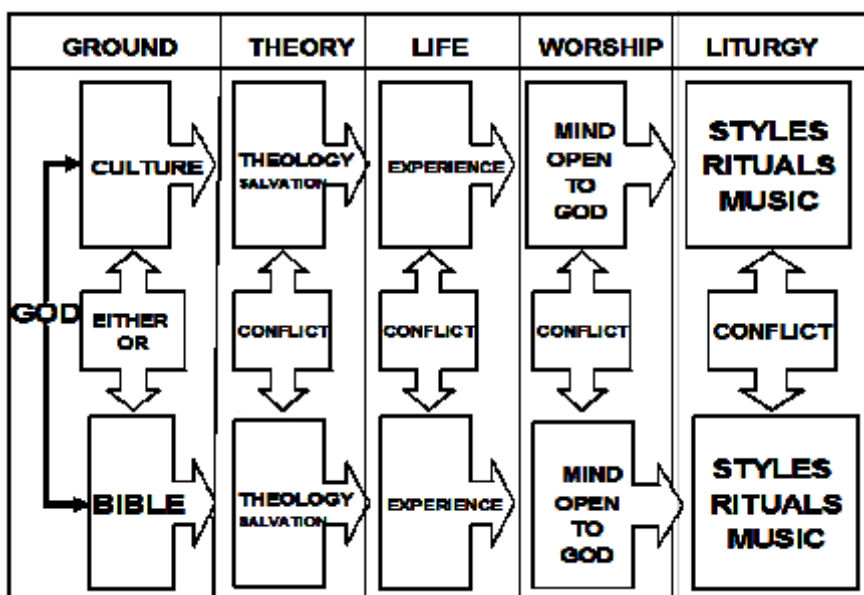


Figure 1 Conditions of Worship and Liturgy

If we describe the diagram from the viewpoint of our life experience (historical order), we have to start from right and move to the left. The diagram's headers present interlinked levels of reality. They are, (5) liturgy, (4) worship, (3) life, (2) theory, and, (1) the ground. The liturgical level (5) includes, for instance, styles, rituals, and music. The (4) worship level refers to the inner attitude of the mind open to God. The "life" level (3) antecedes the worship level in the sense that experiences of the Christian life are conditions to the worship experience and help to shape liturgical forms. Yet,

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the “theory” level (2), where the understanding of theology and salvation takes place, logically precedes and helps to shape the levels of life, worship and liturgy. Finally, the “ground” level (1) is the foundation on which the other four levels stand. If we consider the same components in their logical order (causal order) we have to start from the left moving to the right. Thus, the (1) ground causes our (2) theological understanding, that in turn, influences (3) our life experience in Christ, which goes on to (4) elicit our worship, and (5) shape our liturgical styles.

Ellen White makes the connections drawn in this diagram when explaining Satan’s ways of deception. “Satan is constantly seeking to divert the attention of the people from the Bible”⁸ [ground level 1]. “It is Satan’s constant effort to misrepresent the character of God, the nature of sin, and the real issues at stake in the great controversy. His sophistry lessens the obligation of the divine law and gives men license to sin. At the same time he causes them to cherish false conceptions of God [*level 2 of theory*] so that they regard Him with fear and hate rather than with love [*level 3 of life*]. The cruelty inherent in his own character is attributed to the Creator; it is embodied in systems of religion and expressed in modes of worship [*level 4 of worship*]. Thus the minds of men are blinded, and Satan secures them as his agents to war against God. By perverted conceptions of the divine attributes, heathen nations were led to believe human sacrifices necessary to secure the favor of Deity; and horrible cruelties have been perpetrated under the various forms of idolatry [*level 5 of liturgy*].”⁹

Historically we know liturgy by action. As we experience rituals, they become part of who we are. We belong to the liturgy, and, the liturgy belongs to us. With repetition liturgy becomes second nature. This explains why many find very difficult to analyze rationally or explain with words their views about liturgy. We can see why matters of liturgy can become very emotional and sensitive. We cannot ignore the historical level in which we experience liturgy. Because external forms of liturgy appeal to our sensory perception, we always run the risk to confuse them with worship.

When disagreement about liturgical styles arises in the church, we should not forget its emotional nature and try to reflect on it from its causes.

⁸ Ellen White, *Christian Education*. 1893. Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894, 39.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 569.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

In other words, we should distance ourselves from our emotional experience and attempt the difficult task to understand the causes of liturgical styles. We should start by considering the ground of theological beliefs and religious experiences. Let us go back to our diagram above. God's revelation is the ground. Revelation, however, requires human appropriation. Christians have appropriated divine revelation in two main ways. Classical and Modern Christianity think human culture reveals or points to God. Seventh-day Adventism thinks God reveals Himself in Scripture as He personally interacts historically within human culture. These opposite convictions become the ground from which theological understanding, life experiences, worship, and liturgical styles flow. They create two different and conflicting views of theology, salvation, Christian experience, worship, and liturgical styles. In other words, liturgical styles in Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations are closely dependent on the way they understand the revelation-inspiration of Scripture, theology, salvation, the Christian life, and worship. For this reason it is not safe to borrow liturgical styles from evangelical denominations uncritically. If we do, we will accept culturally based rituals and make the church vulnerable to the theological system to which they belong.

When believers assume changing culture as ground of divine revelation—philosophy, science and tradition—they place salvation outside human history. This theological assumption disconnects God and salvation from history and culture. God operates salvation in the timeless non-historical level of the human soul. God does not save in the historical/cultural level but on the higher level of non-historical spirituality. Protestants call it justification by faith or “the gospel;” Roman Catholics call it sacraments.

Liturgy, then, belongs to the realm of history and culture where God does not intervene. This being the case, believers feel free to use cultural forms to worship their conceptions of God. This uncritical use of culture fits well with the use of culture as the ground of theology and life experiences. Yet, as culture changes, Catholic and Protestant denominations are compelled to adapt their theologies and liturgical styles to changing social conventions. Thus, cultural originated rituals and pluralism in liturgical styles fit with the timeless/spiritual nature of divine activity and the gospel experience of salvation. Seventh-day Adventist believers, however, should not adapt liturgical forms to culture as Roman Catholic and Evangelicals do

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

because the ground on which they build their theology and life is not culture but Scripture.

When believers assume Scripture as ground revealing God—*sola, tota, prima scriptura* principle—they find the *transcendent* and *immutable* God personally operating salvation within the historical flow of human history. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, the same God continues to be the center of all histories. As our theologies originate directly from His words revealed to us through the prophets cultural changes do not require changes in theology, life experiences, worship, or liturgical styles. Only new revelatory words from God could bring changes in the Christian life, worship, and liturgical styles. Believers committed to biblical teachings, then, should make any cultural or artistic form they choose to become part of Christian liturgy fit the overall teachings of the Bible, especially its teachings about salvation, and the new life in Christ. Specific principles about liturgy should also fit the overall theological and experiential contexts based on the *sola scriptura* principle.

There are, then, two different and conflicting ways to incorporate cultural elements in Christian liturgies and rituals. One way, grounded in culture, adopted mainly by Catholic and main line Evangelical denominations, use only non-permanent cultural guidelines—philosophy and science—to determine the inclusion of current cultural customs in their liturgies. Another way, grounded on Biblical revelation, adopted by Seventh-day Adventism and some biblically based Evangelical congregations, use only permanent biblical guidelines to determine the inclusion of current cultural customs in their liturgies. Let us turn our attention to some general principles of worship we find in Scripture.

3. General Principles of Worship

What is a principle? The Oxford dictionary tells us that a principle is “a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning.” Simply put, a principle is a guide that helps us understand nature and life. In this section, we turn our attention to biblical principles that may help us personally and as a community to experience true Christian worship and express it using compatible cultural forms in our liturgy.

We will consider some general principles first. They will help us to understand the nature of worship. Later we will survey briefly a few principles of congregational worship. Both set of principles are reliable

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

criteria Adventists may use to evaluate, modify and identify cultural forms compatible with Scripture and acceptable to God.

Principle of Origin: God the Creator

The cause of worship is God—His nature, actions and initiatives. That worship is about God, not about us, or our cultural preferences is the grounding principle of Christian worship. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, biblical authors clearly teach this principle. Twenty five centuries ago God told Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt to *worship Him* (Exodus 3:12). At the end of Scripture, we find the angel God used to give the visions of Revelation telling John to “*worship God*” (Revelation 22:8-9). According to Jesus, this principle is universal, all the angels (Hebrews, 1:6) and even Satan (Matthew 4:16) must worship God. Ellen White underlines the eternal permanence of this principle. “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.”¹⁰ This distinction is huge. It tells us God’s reality goes beyond the greatness of his exalted throne in heaven. Theologians call it “divine transcendence.” This means that God is great, beyond our understanding (Job 36:26). Not even the highest heaven can contain him (2 Chronicles 6:18). This can help us to understand why the second commandment tells us not to make any image of God (Exodus 20:4). God’s the creator is beyond images. To make an image of God is to limit him to one of his creatures. The greatness and transcendence of God the creator elicits worship and requires befitting liturgical forms.

From Moses’ and John’s statements above, we learn that worship is a human action directed to God. Interestingly, neither the Hebrew nor the Greek languages have a specific word for worship as we do in English. Addressing Moses, God used the Hebrew word *‘abad*, which means, “to serve, to work, to be a slave, to worship.” Addressing John, the angel used the Greek word *proskunéw*, which means, “to bow down.” According to these words, worship includes human *submission* and *service* to God.

¹⁰ *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*, 1888. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1907), 437-438, emphasis added.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Submission points to the inner spiritual nature of worship. *Service* describes its external expression as life style.

If worship is a relation of submission and service to God, the way we understand God (theology) determines our worship and liturgy. This link between theology and worship fits the presuppositions of worship we described in figure 1 above. The less we know the God of Scripture the more likely culture will shape our worship and liturgy. Ellen White's statement quoted above masterfully underlines God the Creator as the biblical origin and referent of worship and liturgy.

We worship the creator. In doing that, Seventh-day Adventist worship departs from most organized religions that accept deep time evolutionary ideas. According to the message of the first angel's in Revelation 14, God's visible end time Church will worship the Creator and proclaim it to the world (Revelation 14 7). As our understanding of God differs, so does our Christian life, worship, and choice of liturgical forms.

Christian believers worship God in Christ. Christ is the creator (John 1:1-3) incarnated in human nature (John 1:14). Yet, many believers forget the otherness and greatness of Christ as Creator and assume that in worship they relate to a human friend. This view promotes a wrong sense of familiarity that leads to informality, casualness, and entertainment.

We need to broaden and deepen our idea about who God is beyond His incarnation in Jesus Christ. The Bible will help us to do that. As our ideas of God expand through Bible study our worship experience, and liturgical forms will conform to the transcendence and otherness of God. As we approach the presence of the infinite and mysterious Creator, a sense of awe and reverence will fill our hearts and houses of worship.

Principle of Existence: Discipleship as Necessary Condition

While God is the cause of worship, human response is the necessary condition of its existence. Without human response there is no worship. Human response, then, belongs to the relational essence of worship. The nature of human response in worship is already implicit in the words submission and service Old and New Testaments use to name it. Thus, only true disciples worship God. Thousands of professed Christians can participate in religious ceremonies, but only Christ's disciples can offer Him true acceptable worship.

How do sinners become disciples? Baptism (a worship ritual) does not change sinners into disciples. Ellen White explains, "the condition and

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

evidence of our discipleship is self denial and the cross. Unless these are brought into our experience, we cannot know God; *we cannot worship him in spirit and in truth and in the beauty of holiness.*¹¹ Jesus taught that if we continue in His way we are truly his disciples (John 8:31). We become disciples, then, when by studying Scripture understand Jesus' life style and freely accept to follow Him leaving behind the life style of the old self (Ephesians 4:22) and the world (Galatians 6:14). Self-denial central to Christ's incarnation and life makes possible discipleship (service to Christ). According to Paul, this is the only rational (coherent) way to worship God (Romans 12:1). Without discipleship, private and corporate worship rituals are external forms voided of power, meaning, and coherence. This brings us to the nature of worship.

Principle of Nature: Spirit and Truth

When Jesus told a Samaritan woman that "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24, NRSV), He defined the nature of worship. Commenting on this passage, Ellen White pointed out that Christ was "...showing that the ritual service was passing away, and possessed no virtue... True circumcision is the worship of Christ in spirit and truth, not in forms and ceremonies, with hypocritical pretense."¹² Consequently, believers need to realize that worship does not consist in performing external rituals (liturgy), but in experiencing inner spiritual surrendering to God's truth.

If worship is a matter of the heart (mind, will, and emotions), sinful human beings need a constant renewal of their thought patterns and contents. Knowing that inner thoughts corrupt men and women (Genesis 6:5; Matthew 15:18), Paul realized that worshipers must not only avoid adopting the thinking of the world, but they must seek to adopt Christ's thought patterns (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:5). As Christ transforms the thoughts of men and women in his likeness, they become ready to worship him in spirit and truth.

If our thoughts must not conform to the world, how can we pretend God will accept liturgical forms adapted to the way of thinking and acting of the world? Our liturgical forms must be compatible with the spiritual nature of worship, and fit Christ's thoughts and truth. Yet, we must not forget that

¹¹ Ibidem, 51, emphasis mine.

¹² *Special Testimonies on Education*. c.1897, unpublished work, 173.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

liturgy is only the external vehicle of worship. Even if we dare to enact rituals ordained by God in Scripture formally, without spirit and truth, we are not worshiping but offending God (Isaiah 1:11-14).

Principle of Enjoyment: Meeting a Friend

Worship must be a pleasant occasion¹³ not because the liturgical style is attractive to our taste, but because we meet Christ. We meet Christ in His word. In other words, if worship becomes pleasant to you only when music, drama, decorations, and ceremonies appeal to your personal or cultural “taste,” you may not be worshiping but seeking entertainment and performing an external work. You may need to become a disciple of Christ to fulfill the necessary condition of worship.

Ellen White clearly understood the enjoyment principle of worship. “When they worship Him, He expects to be with them, to bless and comfort them, filling their hearts with joy and love. The Lord desires His children to take comfort in His service and to find more pleasure than hardship in His work. He desires that those who come to worship Him shall carry away with them precious thoughts of His care and love, that they may be cheered in all the employments of daily life, that they may have grace to deal honestly and faithfully in all things.”¹⁴ Doubtless, the enjoyment of worship embraces much more than rituals and ceremonies.

Although music, ceremonies, rituals, and social interaction have a rightful place in church services, they do not belong to the nature of Christian worship. Many have a hard time understanding that the joy of worship generates from following Christ daily, not from the liturgy. Worship takes place personally as a life experience of discipleship. In congregational worship, believers express the joy daily communion with God and service to him generates in their lives. The disciple brings joy to the worship service to share with God and fellow believers. Joy of worship is not generated by the attractiveness of liturgy.

The notion that joy originates in liturgy corrupts the worshiping experience. Liturgy operates on the senses not on the spirit where worship

¹³ “Our God is a tender, merciful Father. His service should not be looked upon as a heart-saddening, distressing exercise. It should be a pleasure to worship the Lord and to take part in His work. God would not have His children, for whom so great salvation has been provided, act as if He were a hard, exacting taskmaster” Ellen White, *Lift Him Up*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988, 254.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

takes place. In the twentieth century liturgy seeks to keep its ephemeral appeal to the senses by accommodating to the entertainment industry. By adapting liturgical forms to the world Christians disregard the Bible as ground of worship (see figure 1), its principles of worship, and the essence of Christianity.

This procedure is not new. Ellen White vividly describes the results of this approach to liturgy in Ahab's time. "Captivated by the gorgeous display and the fascinating rites of idol worship, the people followed the example of the king and his court, and gave themselves up to the intoxicating, degrading pleasures of a sensual worship. In their blind folly they chose to reject God and His worship. The light so graciously given them had become darkness. The fine gold had become dim."¹⁵

4. Principles of Congregational Worship

For many Adventists "worship" boils down to the Saturday morning sermon. What should we do when we meet together to worship God? To answer this question we will consider briefly some principles of congregational worship. Congregational principles assume, expand, and affirm the general principles discussed above.

Principle of Existence: Divine Presence

Is it possible to go to church without worshiping God? Can we equal attendance to church with worship? What does it take for a congregation to worship God? According to the general principles of origin and existence, worship originates in God's creation and exists in human discipleship. Thus, God as creator and discipleship are preconditions of congregational worship. Disciples come to worship the Creator. Yet, what should take place for congregational worship to exist?

Congregational worship responds to God's presence. Without divine presence, worship does not exist. We only meet, sing and relate to each other. How do we experience the presence of God in congregational worship? Ellen White explains, "although God dwells not in temples made with hands, yet He honors with *His presence* the assemblies of His people. He has promised that when they come together to seek Him, to acknowledge their sins, and to pray for one another, *He will meet with them*

¹⁵ *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 1890. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958, 116.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

by His Spirit."¹⁶ According to Christ, however, we do not see or feel the Holy Spirit (John 3: 7-8). How, then, can we experience the presence of Christ?

The way in which Christians understand God's presence through the Holy Spirit varies widely. Roman Catholics and main line Protestantism believe Christ is present in the sacraments, specially, the Eucharist. Charismatic Christians think they experience the presence of Christ in the baptism of the Holy Spirit generally manifested in conjunction with loud music, the gift of tongues, and preaching. Biblical Christians believe Christ becomes present when his word is proclaimed. Ellen White explains, "God's Spirit is in his word, and a special blessing will be received by those who accept the words of God when illuminated to their mind by the Holy Spirit. It is thus that the believer eats of Christ, the Bread of Life. Truth is seen in a new light, and the *soul rejoices as in the visible presence of Christ.*"¹⁷

"When we bow in prayer, let us remember that Jesus is with us. When we go into the house of God, let us remember that we are not going into the place of worship alone. We bring Jesus with us. If the people of God could have a realizing sense of this fact, they would not be inattentive hearers of the word. There would not be a cold lethargy upon hearts, so that those who profess his name cannot speak of his love."¹⁸

Congregational worship exists because of the proclamation, explanation, and application of God's words to the concrete life of believers. For this reason, the sermon, personal testimonies, and, biblical lyrics (spiritual songs?) become the essential sensory/spiritual component of worship. Yet, proclamation of the word in itself is not worship. Worship is the invisible and free movement of the mind/life of individual believers who respond to God's word in deep and complete commitment to Him.

When public worship takes place, God the creator makes himself present in Christ through the Word and the Holy Spirit, and in response, disciples offer a renewed commitment of faith, spiritual songs, praise, thanksgiving, and devotion. Ellen White brings it home. "When our hearts are tuned to praise our Maker, not only in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, but also in our lives, we shall live in communion with Heaven. Our

¹⁶ *Prophets and Kings*, 1917. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943, 50.

¹⁷ *Signs of the Times*, October 10, 1895 par. 9, emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, April 18, 1892 par. 10.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

offering of grateful thanks will not be spasmodic, or reserved for special occasions; there will be gratitude in the heart and in the home, in private as well as in public devotion. This constitutes the true worship of God.”¹⁹

Principle of Attraction: The Resurrected Christ

Why do you go to church on Saturdays? Is it the music? Do you go to meet friends? Do you like the way the pastor preaches? Do you attend church because of the air conditioned and architectural style of the building, or the fact that the church is conveniently located and holds meetings in a time slot that fits your schedule? If you go to church for these or similar reasons, you may not be worshiping God.

God designed that in worship Christ should be the real, living, active center of attraction. Christ promised that “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” (John 12:32, NIV). “*Christ purposed that his cross should become the center of attraction, whereby he should draw the hearts of men to himself.*”²⁰ Ellen White explains that “the Father came in vital connection with the world through his well-beloved Son, and the revelation of divine truth through the Son was designed to draw men to the Father.”²¹ The resurrected Christ through the Holy Spirit draws all men to Himself. Not all will worship Him, not all will be saved, but all will be attracted by Christ to Himself. When men and women respond to Christ’s attraction they worship Him in Spirit and Truth. Do you go to church to meet Christ? Does the joy of meeting his presence in his word move you to your knees, service and praise?

5. Principles of Liturgy

Principle of Creativity: Obedience to Christ

The principle of attraction leads to the principle of creativity and liveliness. Worship liturgy must be attractive and testify of the worshiper’s personal commitment to Christ. This requires obedient creativity in shaping attractive liturgical forms that appeal worshipers to surrender their lives to Christ and serve Him in their daily lives.

Ellen White beautifully connects the Christ as the principle of attraction and the principle of obedient creativity and liveliness of liturgical forms.

¹⁹ *The Youth’s Instructor*, December, 31, 1896.

²⁰ *Signs of the Times*, May 8, 1893 (emphasis added).

²¹ *Ibidem*.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

“The highest commendation we can receive as Christian workers—explains Ellen White—is to say that we present Christ lifted up on the cross as the object of supreme desire; and how can we do this better than by making religion attractive? Let us show that to us the *worship* of God is not drudgery and dry form, but spirit and life.”²²

Obedient creativity seeks to express our transformation into the likeness of Christ; not our cultural differences, preferences, and habits. Therefore, the forms of worship we create should be trans-cultural rather than cultural conditioned. We should carefully avoid using forms springing or associated with sinful practices and habits. At the same time, our liturgy should be attractive and an expression of the spiritual joy that springs from worshipping Christ.

Principle of Content: Distinguishing between the Holy and Common

Through the elaborated liturgical system of the Old Testament, God intended to show His Holiness. Thus, people, actions, and things God chose to use in the ritual became “holy,” that is, consecrated for holy use. For instance, Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, presented “strange fire before God” (Leviticus 10:1). What they probably did was to ignite their censer not with the indicated fire of the altar but used a common not the consecrated source of fire. The consequences were horrific and probably unexpected. “Fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:2, NKJV). Moses explained God’s action to his brother Aaron, “this is what the Lord meant when he said, ‘Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified’ ” (Leviticus 10:3, NRSV). In this context, God expressed an important general principle of liturgy: “You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean” (Leviticus 10:10 NIV). God did not only formulate this principle theoretically, but also explain its importance and non negotiability in real life by punishing Nadab and Abihu to death by fire.

This principle specifically relates to congregational worship. Should this principle apply to Christian liturgy? Although God devised the Old Testament liturgical system to be used until Christ’s death (Mark 15:38; Matthew 27:51; 2 Corinthians 3:11), He continues to be Holy, and desires

²² *Signs of the Times*, December 4, 1884, emphasis added.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

to show Himself Holy in those who approach Him. Moreover, because God's nature and his plan of salvation are immutable (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Hebrews 6:13-18; 13:8), this principle applies to Christian worship. Consequently, we should not use what is common and ordinary before Him. Needless to say, we should not include in Christian worship anything clearly associated with the world or our past sinful life (c.f. Deuteronomy 12:1-6).

Ellen White suggests, "no one should bring into service the power of imagination to worship that which belittles God in the mind and associates Him with common things. Those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth. They must exercise living faith. Their worship will then be controlled not by the imagination, but by genuine faith."²³ In liturgical matters the criterion to include cultural contents in liturgical forms should be what is pleasant to Him, not what appeals to the personal or cultural preferences of worshipers. Worship is about God, not about the worshiper. How can we distinguish between the holy and the common?

According to Ellen White we need to purify our souls,²⁴ and avoid becoming absorbed in businesses of this world.²⁵ This counsel is important because failing to differentiate between the sacred and the profane may seem of little importance to postmodern secular people, yet it remains a slippery slope leading to idolatry. "Solomon—explains Ellen White—changed his place of worship to Jerusalem, but his former act in sacrificing in a place not made sacred by the presence of the Lord, but dedicated to the worship of idols, removed from the minds of the people something of the repulsion with which they should have regarded the horrible performances practiced by idolaters. *This mingling of the sacred*

²³ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 1953-1957. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970: 4, 1145.

²⁴ "Whatever may be our condition or position in life, it is our privilege to have the faith that works by love and purifies the soul. Faith that produces love to God and love to our neighbor is true faith. This faith will lead to genuine sanctification. *It will increase our reverence for sacred things*" *Sings of the Times*, February, 24, 1890; emphasis added.

²⁵ "But those who ought to have stood in the clear light, that they might present the attractions of Christ before the people, and lift up Jesus before them as soon as out of the desk, were earnestly preaching of buying and selling real estate, and of investing money in mining stock. *Their minds absorbed in business affairs could not distinguish between the sacred and the common; discernment was blunted, the deceptive power of the enemy was exercised over their minds*" The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials. 4 vols. Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987, 51; emphasis added.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

and the profane was the first step in the practice of Solomon which led him to suppose that the Lord was not so particular in regard to the worship of His people. Thus he was educating himself to make still greater departures from God and His work. Little by little his heathen wives led him to make them altars on which to sacrifice to their gods.”²⁶

Principle of Suspicion: *Sola Scriptura*

Careful application of the principle of suspicion is necessary because in liturgy formation creativity may spring at times from the sinful desires of disobedient hearts. More than two millennia ago, Gideon used his creativity to build an alternate place of worshipping Yahweh around a golden ephod he built with the booty taken from the Midianites (Judges 8:26-27). Gideon’s creativity led Israel into licentious worship. “His sin consisted in taking over the prerogatives of the Aaronic priesthood without divine sanction. This deviation from the right prepared the way for wider apostasy both in his immediate family and among the tribesmen.”²⁷

Ellen White explains the results of Gideon’s liturgical creativity. “The course pursued by Gideon proved a snare, not only to himself and family, but to all Israel. The irregular and unauthorized worship led the people finally to forsake the Lord altogether, to serve idols. The ephod and the breastplate were regarded with pride, because of their costly material and exquisite workmanship; and after a time were looked upon with superstitious reverence. The services at the place of worship were celebrated with feasting and merriment, and at last became a scene of dissipation and licentiousness. Thus Israel were led away from God by the very man who had once overthrown their idolatry.”²⁸

In this context Ellen White states the principle of suspicion. “All plans based upon human reasoning should be looked upon with a jealous eye, lest Satan insinuate himself into the position which belongs to God alone.”²⁹ A “jealous eye” meant a “suspicious eye,”³⁰ a distrustful eye. In other words, we should distrust our reasoning and imagination. We should always

²⁶ *The Seventh-Day Bible Commentary*, 2:1025.

²⁷ Francis D. Nichol ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), Jdg 8:30.

²⁸ *Signs of the Times*, July 28, 1881.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*, (Electronic Version by Christian Technologies, Inc., c. 2002), jealous.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

subject our thoughts and creations to biblical criticism. Yet, how can we criticize our own thoughts and creations? We should start by assuming that our imaginations are sinful and our opinions tainted. Then, we should test our ideas and liturgical creations by the biblical principles, doctrines, and the principles of worship as detailed earlier in this article. Finally, we should in prayer seek the advice of Brethren of proven wisdom and faithfulness to God's Word.

Principle of Spiritual Effect

When creating or selecting liturgy for congregational worship we should keep in mind that liturgical forms influence the human spirit. Consequently, they should motivate, facilitate, express, and enhance the experience of individual and congregational worship. The spiritual effect of liturgy will be determined by the way in which we understand the origin, nature and existence of worship (see above), and the presence of God. Without a biblical theological understanding of the Divine and human spirits we will not be able to properly assess the spiritual effects of the rituals we choose. By default, we will choose rituals that please our fallen human spirits. Such liturgical forms will not motivate true Christian worship in spirit and truth.

As modern Christians forget that Christ is the Creator, their worship and liturgy progressively lose reverence and awe. With the explicit intention of attracting secular believers, pastors intentionally adapt their liturgical forms to contemporary cultural trends. The spiritual effect of this ecumenical liturgical approach is no longer Christian but worldly. A worldly spirit of familiarity, informality, and casualness replaces the Christian spirit of reverence and awe before the presence of God.

Christ's incarnation does not justify a change in the spiritual effect of liturgical forms. Ellen White correctly explains, "it is dishonoring God to speak of him as though he were on a level with finite man. We should speak with reverence the sacred name of Christ, for, although he humbled himself and became obedient to the death of the cross, yet he thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Let us take this precious name upon our lips with profound reverence. Some have allowed their feelings to control their judgment, in meetings for worship, and have indulged in words and attitudes that have not been in harmony with the solemn worship of God. We have heard men shout and jump, and pound the desk, and use vain repetition, and this they thought was worship to God. But it was not

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

according to the direction or will of God. All that is coarse in attitude or word makes the service of Christ a matter of ridicule, and brings confusion into the house and worship of God.”³¹

Liturgy should always flow from and enhance the experience of worship existing in the heart of the believer. Consequently, when considering congregational liturgical forms, we should carefully examine their effect on the spirit of the believer. This is very important because worship takes place as an inner attitude of the mind, will, and emotions. If what we do in church disturbs our spiritual capacity for receiving the presence of God in His word (principles of existence and nature), we should modify or drop what we are doing, no matter how appealing to the senses our rituals could be.

Instead, liturgical forms should inspire a sense of awe, reverence, and expectation for the presence of God as necessary condition of worship. In the Old Testament God commanded, “...have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:30, NIV). Following God’s command, Paul instructs New Testament believers to offer God “...an acceptable worship with *reverence and awe*” (Hebrews 12:28 NRSV, emphasis added). Reverence and awe are appropriate spiritual effects of liturgy because they prepare our spiritual capacities for receiving the presence of God in His Word.

Reverence is to treat something or somebody with great respect; in other words, to have due regard for someone’s feelings, wishes, or rights.³² Awe is a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder.³³ The principles of origin and existence presented above determine the principle of congregational mood. Ellen White explains, “Jehovah, the eternal, self-existent, uncreated One, Himself the Source and Sustainer of all, is alone entitled to supreme reverence and worship.”³⁴

Two decades before the end of the nineteenth century Ellen White thought Adventist worship needed to grow in reverence. I think that her comments apply also to Adventists at the beginning of the twenty first

³¹ *Signs of the Times*, February, 24 1890.

³² James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996), H3372.

³³ See the *Oxford Dictionary*.

³⁴ *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 1890 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 306; c.f., *The Great Controversy*, 436-437.

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

century. “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. Is there not a cause for the want of fervent piety in our families? Is it not 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. 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.”³⁵

6. Conclusion

Experimentation with “worship styles” has caused confusion among Adventist believers at the turn of the 21st century. Frequently, creativity in Adventist worship styles boils down to borrowing increasingly secularized liturgical forms from evangelical congregations. Contemporary “worship styles,” absorb cultural forms drawn from the entertainment industry. Leaders involved in this drawn out experimentation uncritically assume that even pop cultural forms produced to express worldly and sinful sentiments are acceptable to God. We asked in the introduction, are worship styles a matter of taste or a matter of principle? Is personal taste a reliable principle to shape our corporate worship style? Are there principles we can use to help us shape our worship and choose what we include in it?

Our brief perusal of biblical evidence and Ellen White’s thoughts on worship suggests some preliminary answers. Worship is not a matter of taste or cultural preferences but a state of mind and an attitude of the heart. Pastors and believers should start by understanding the clear biblical distinction between worship and liturgical styles. As pastors lead congregational worship they should bear in mind that in our relationship with God worship is the essential core and liturgy an external formality.

³⁵ *Testimonies for the Church*. 9 vols. 1855-1909 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 5: 495-496.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Worship may exist without liturgy, but liturgy is meaningless without worship.

Consequently, personal or cultural taste and preference are not reliable principles from which to shape our liturgical forms. Instead, we find in Scripture and Ellen White clear principles regarding worship and liturgical styles that Adventists should understand and use to criticize and modify any cultural form they may want to use in their liturgy. Literally, we cannot introduce in our congregational liturgy anything common unless first we purify it by the careful application of biblical principles of worship and liturgy formation.

We have shown that liturgical forms are contextualized to a series of interlinked principles. They assume principles of liturgy. Principles of liturgy assume principles of worship. Principles of worship assume a life of Christian discipleship. A life of Christian discipleship assumes a broad and deep understanding of theology. And theology assumes the ground of biblical revelation. Liturgical forms must fit perfectly within this multi-layered contextual background. This should preempt any attempt to assimilate liturgical forms from evangelical churches that ground their theology not only from Scripture but mainly from culture and tradition.

In this article we came across a few interlinked principles of personal worship. The transcendence of God the creator originates worship (principle of origin). Discipleship is the condition required for its existence (principle of existence). Spirit and truth are the realm of reality and the general content of the worshipping act (principle of nature). Worship is a pleasant occasion because in it we meet with God our friend (principle of enjoyment). Two principles of congregational worship came to our attention. Congregational worship springs from the presence of God the Creator in His Word through the Holy Spirit (principle of existence). Christ and His cross is the lure that brings worshipers to church (principle of attraction).

We also learned some principles of liturgy formation. Our liturgical forms should be attractive and appeal to worshipers to surrender their lives to Christ and serve Him in their daily lives (principle of creativity). In selecting activities to include in our liturgy we should be careful to distinguish between the holy and the common (principle of content). Because even Jesus' disciples are still involved in the Great Controversy with Satan who expresses himself through the world we should be critical of our own judgments and choices that relate to liturgy formation (principle

CANALE: PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY

of suspicion). Our liturgical forms and ceremonies should help create an atmosphere of reverence and awe necessary to appreciate the presence of God in His Word, and respond to Him in worship (surrender and service) (principle of congregational mood). Each congregation needs to understand these principles and apply them to their concrete experience of congregational worship and liturgical formation.

Finally, I hope we all understand the relative importance of liturgy. Participation in liturgical forms and ceremonies is not worship. True worship can exist without congregational liturgy. Worship is necessary for salvation, liturgy is not. Those who reduce their religious experience to the external forms of worship will not be saved. For them, liturgy becomes legalism and even a form of justification by works. Church goers should keep in mind that God desires “steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6, NRSV).

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