Trumpet Blasts and Hosannas: A Once and Future Adventism

by Roy Branson

My mother was a fifth-generation Adventist. She grew up in the mission field and married a minister. She worked with him through World War II as he became president of the Middle East Union. She taught in the school he founded there—Middle East College. My father, at the age of 54, died of a massive heart attack. After Elder H. M.S Richards' funeral sermon and the burial in the cemetery at Loma Linda, mother and I sat next to each other in the car taking us back to our home. We both knew that in a day or two I would leave to resume my studies at the seminary at Andrews.

She finally broke the silence. "I wonder if we'll ever see him again." I was stunned. I talked about seeing Dad soon, about meeting him in the resurrection. She turned directly to her seminarian son and said very quietly, very slowly, "We never know for sure." A fifth-generation Adventist.

My mother was not wondering if Dad's sins had been forgiven, or hers, or mine. As a college student, and even after they were married and Dad was a young preacher, he had asked a lot of questions about faith and theology. But she knew he had gained a faith that had sustained a lifetime of robust and dedicated Christian service. My mother was not asking "Has Dad been saved?" but "Where is God?" She was not worried about transgression of law; she was not asking me to provide her with a theory of the atonement. She was devastated by her loss, by loneliness, by death. She was anguished at the absence of God. And so are we—as individuals and as a church.

Early Adventists

Jan Daffern stresses that Adventism was born out of just this anguish—the very modern sense of the absence of God. One evening at the Oakwood College faculty colloquium she identified Adventists with those who yearned, who hungered for the presence of God—through 1843, through the day and into the long night of October 22, 1844. "We wept and we wept," said Hiram Edson, "until the day dawned." Adventists, Jan insists, must never forget that they are the disappointed; must never forget they are part of the community of the broken, the suffering, the despised—the ethnic minority, the illegal immigrant, the disabled.

Abraham Joshua Heschel would have agreed. Part of being a prophet, he said—and surely of being a prophetic movement—is to be a passionate link between the pathos of humanity and the compassion of God.[1]

How then, to explain the resurrection of the broken Millerites into the dynamic Seventh-day Adventists? Precisely, I think, by realizing that they endured a *disappointment*—not merely a Great Error or a Great Backsliding—not merely an intellectual miscalculation or loss of will. They suffered a cosmic loneliness; a dark day and night with no resurrection, a sentence of hopeless lingering. "Where is God?" was a cry from the passionate core of their being.

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What rescued them was not merely technical research, nor campaigns to summon greater willpower. It was through a rekindling of their worship experience, through a reigniting of their apocalyptic imagination that they once again came to feel the presence of God; came to feel their passion renewed.

Early Christianity went through its own Great Disappointment. After Christ's departure Christians experienced fear at the absence of God. They endured a cosmic loneliness, a sentence of hopeless lingering. Not surprisingly, Paul very early

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confronted Greek Christians in Thessalonika and Corinth who dreaded death. He reassured them with that great hymn that begins "Now is Christ risen from the dead," and ends "even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

For Paul and the early Christian community the sacraments were not just means for receiving forgiveness for transgressions of the law. The sacraments were moments when the absent Lord again became present. Rising from the waters of baptism, the early Christian reenacted, indeed participated in, Christ's baptism, his resurrection. In each celebration of the Last Supper, Christians felt that the Lord again came and dwelt among them. The apostles were human sacraments. With all their manifold faults—and the Christian church remembered them all—those who saw Christ, who shared his pain, his passion, his assurance were visible means by which an absent God made his presence felt.

When the memories of the eyewitnesses were fashioned into Gospels, one of the authors—John—even reassured the Christian community that no less than a member of the Godhead had the special responsibility for being with them—the Spirit was to be a comforter in place of the absent Son (John 15:26).

Indeed, the New Testament as a whole served as a vehicle for divine presence. It emerged from, and in turn became a part of, Christian worship—none more than the apocalyptic imagery of the last book of the New Testament. Rather than looking at the book in private, most early Christians heard the *Apocalypse* read in their worship services. The hymns constituting much of the *Apocalypse* gathered the heavenly hosts into the little congregations of Asia Minor; the imagery of the hymns then flung the believers into the farthest reaches of the cosmos. No wonder the *Apocalypse* remained in the canon. Christians could not do without it. Written toward the end of the first century after Christ, it vividly kept the risen but absent Christ alive.

Many mistakenly think that the *Apocalypse*, so important for Adventist identity, merely points Christians to the future, to the second coming of Christ; that it is a detailed history of the future. Actually, the apocalyptic imagination spends more time drawing the heavenly realms—the sanctuary, the emerald throne, the risen and active Lord of thousands times thousands—into the Christians' present experience. As C. Rowland puts it in his comprehensive study, *The Open Heaven*, "apocalyptic is as much involved in the attempt to understand things as they are now as to predict future events."[2]

The early Seventh-day Adventists were so steeped in the apocalyptic imagination that when the Millerite setting of times for the future return of Christ failed, they shifted the emphasis of apocalyptic to the present. In the image of the sanctuary they reemphasized the present activity of God in the cosmos.

Sanctuary symbolism brought them assurance. God might not be immediately breaking in from the future, but he was active in the present. Where is God? He is in the heavenly sanctuary. John the Revelator's portrayal of divine activity and majesty in the heavenly realms provided sanctuary to the disappointed. The little flock could be warmed by glory. Their present had become a part

of the most holy.

The experience of the disappointed was also rekindled by the radiance of Ellen White's experience. An absent God again came near through an Ellen returning, in their midst, from visits to the Holy City and its temple suffused with the "eternal weight of glory." "Our faces," she reported, "began to light up and shine with the glory of God as Moses did when he came down from Mount Sinai." What the apostles were for the early church, Ellen White was for Adventists: a living sacrament, a visible means of experiencing God's invisible presence.

The absent God also came near in the Sabbath. We usually think of the Sabbath conferences simply as theological disputes, intellectual clarifications, casuistry of divine law. But the fundamental importance of the Sabbath was its experience of the divine. The Great Day of the Lord remained beyond, but in the Sabbath day one encountered the holy now. To cross its threshold was to enter God's dwelling place; to become contemporary with God himself—a sacrament in time. Where is God? He is in this moment. For the disappointed what had been a present devoid of divinity again glowed with God's presence.

To have been in God's presence is to be empowered beyond one's expectations. Renewed by their vision of the sanctuary, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the Sabbath, those who had been dispirited Millerites in 1844 gathered in less than 20 years to formally organize the Seventh-day Adventist movement.

The apocalyptic vision not only reassures, it propels. John the Revelator demanded the impossible from the communities of vision that heard his apocalypse. After igniting their congregational worship, warming them with the presence of God, John expected them to burst forth to overthrow the pretensions of a blasphemous, self-indulgent, tyrannical empire. He provided them with powerful metaphors to strip the evil empire and its wicked institutions of their glamour, attraction and legitimacy. John left no doubt that he expected the Christian congregations to lead a revolution of the imagination. And the Hellenistic world was overturned.

The apocalyptic communities of the early Christian church and 19th century America first felt despair at the absence of God, began to experience renewal through sacraments of his presence, then set about transforming their worlds. To be drawn into the apocalyptic experience is to be thrust from anguish to hope, from defeat to revolution. It is to be Ellen Harmon of Portland, Maine, one day and the Spirit of Prophecy the next, marching from visions in New England across the continent—New York, Michigan, the Pacific coast—and finally the world.

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Just when the Seventh-day Adventists were organizing themselves into a denomination, the Civil War and combat over slavery dominated mid-19th century America. A people who knew John the Revelator branded Rome a whore, deserving to be burned, were quite ready to call a United States of America tolerating slavery a dragonlike beast. The Adventists were very willing to warn President Abraham Lincoln in the *Review and Herald* that if he refused to free the slaves he faced the same fate that "of old brought Pharaoh to an untimely end."[3]

The battle against slavery in the 1860s was followed in the 1870s by war against the liquor-trafficker, a part, Ellen White thundered, of "the mystic Babylon of the *Apocalypse*," dealing in "slaves and souls of men."[4]

In the early 1890s Adventists were among the earliest to take on the challenge of transforming urban America. Seventh-day Adventists realized that the apocalyptic imagination does not simply strip civilization of its pretenses and cast it into a bottomless pit or lake of fire. The apocalyptic also evokes alternative civilizations—opulent, filled with gold and precious jewels; cities filled with

vivid colors, bridal parties, wedding feasts, justice and harmony. Seventh-day Adventists, assured by sacraments of God's presence—the Sanctuary, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the Sabbath—set about embodying in their institutions their apocalyptic vision of an ideal society.

Within three years of becoming active in Chicago, Seventh-day Adventists had established by 1896 six different reforming institutions in the city—everything from a five-story medical facility to a workingman's home, inside the downtown loop, that could sleep up to 400 persons a night. By 1898, smaller but similar institutions were being operated in 17 other major American cities, including St. Louis, San Francisco, and New York.

First America, then the world. With Battle Creek successfully revolutionizing American eating habits, Ellen White traveled to Europe and Australia, scattering in her wake, health reform institutions and food industries that changed the diets of Australians and New Zealanders. Directly from medical training in Battle Creek and the clinics of Chicago, Harry Miller sailed the Pacific to China, where he set about developing nutritious and inexpensive uses of soybeans for Asian peasants.

Contemporary Adventism

Just as creation of the state of Israel became the Jewish answer to the absence of God at the Holocaust, the growth of the Adventist church became for some the persuasive answer to the Great Disappointment. As we approach five million members, God and his power seem to have appeared in the growth of membership, schools, and medical centers. In fact, for some, the visible, organized Adventist church became the most potent of all sacraments—a visible means for experiencing God's invisible presence.

But recently, the church—at least in North America—has become more an earthen vessel than a treasure. A severely cracked earthen vessel. I sit at that all-purpose, denominational confessional called the *Spectrum* telephone; the editor hears the most amazing confidences, heresies, and doubts.

Former denominational leaders call to say they really don't know if the present Adventist church is going to survive. Except for "flagship" medical centers, the Adventist Health Systems face major cutbacks. Adventist journals have suffered declining subscriptions over many years. More boarding academies will be closing. In three years a severe decline in academy graduates will probably mean a sudden, precipitous drop in senior college enrollments, which will force the closing of more than one college in North America. Women, who have, year after year, awaited imminent full acceptance by the church, now see the prospect of ordination to the ministry rapidly receding from view. A union president wonders aloud with me if the Adventist church is worth all the effort.

What is going on? Recently, Jan Daffern gave one answer. In her farewell sermon as an associate pastor at Sligo Church, she referred to the topic of her Oakwood talk. In her sermon Jan Daffern said that Adventism is in the midst of another Great Disappointment.

If so, it is not because of poor financial or administrative decisions. The disappointment is much more fundamental. Many Adventists have stopped assuming that Scripture teaches that all of human destiny is determined solely by the actions of this denomination. Many members no longer believe that the Seventh-day Adventist church will determine by its own efforts when the Lord will return.

Some go on to say, just before walking out the church door, that if Adventism is not the hinge of history, if it is not the one and only true church, then who needs it? We might as well go to any church, or make our contribution through those most popular of denominations—the professions. Many who remain assume that if we are only a hinge of history, if we are only a true church, we have been plunged into more than a Great Disappointment. We have experienced the death of the Adventist Movement. Where is God?

Paradoxically, perhaps Adventism's present anguish can bring it back to its origins, bring it back to a vision that speaks more deeply to con-

temporary culture than the symbols that have more often preoccupied us. For example, we will soon be flooded with centennial materials reminding us of the 1888 Minneapolis debates about righteousness by faith that crowded into Adventism 25 years after the founding of the church. Our attention will be redirected to God's law, to our transgression of it, to how we escape punishment for our sins. We will be reintroduced to debates about the questions that have preoccupied many of our middle years as a church, "What must I do to be saved from condemnation of the law? How do I attain righteousness?"

That is what Adventists will be told are the great questions. And they are great issues. But much of modern culture couldn't care less. Think about it. Those Adventists not working for the denomination know that many people in their offices do not define themselves as sinners against God and yearn for forgiveness. Many do not fear and tremble at the prospect of eternal punishment. They are sorry for hurting friends or relatives. But offer them the promise of divine forgiveness and they will greet you with a friendly, indulgent smile. That's nice, but who needs it? When the Adventist church focuses its energies on offering forgiveness to people asking "What must I do to be saved?" it risks limiting its mission to the most pious of Christians.

Of course many people—if not all—do ask religious questions. They may not think that they have sinned against God, but they do fear and tremble. Many people fear boredom and meaninglessness in their lives; almost all tremble at the prospect of death. At the moment of their annihilation, people dread the void. They do ask, "Where is God?"

Indeed, no matter how secular it may appear, our culture fears its annihilation. Confronted by nuclear winter, by the ultimate holocaust, humanity is chilled by a cosmic loneliness, a consciousness of the absence of God.

It is precisely that dread of the void—of meaninglessness and annihilation—that is overwhelmed by the apocalyptic vision. A truly apocalyptic Adventism draws people into experiences of worship that are encounters with the holy. Our Sabbaths are sanctuaries reverberating with the *Apocalypse's* coda to 2,000 years of religious worship—trumpet blasts, voices like the sound of many waters, shouts of the archangel, choirs of harps, amens and hallelujahs from myriad hosts. Sabbath worship is a refraction of the divine radiance; the color, movement, and vitality of the *Apocalypse's* sanctuary, filled with golden candlesticks, billows of incense, pillars of fire, thrones of precious stones. In the apocalyptic vision divine power reaches our place, our time.

Contemporary Adventism should regard a rekindling of the apocalyptic vision as its special gift to contemporary culture. . . . an integral part of the experience of all Christians.

In the sanctuary of the Sabbath experience the despairing not only sense that God exists, but that His presence encompasses the creation—not some distant event, but a continuing divine activity. Ordinary events erupt with meaning. All creation becomes attractive; all creatures reflect divine glory; all people become objects of wonder, of respect.

Contemporary Adventism should regard a rekindling of the apocalyptic vision as its special gift to contemporary culture. It will not simply reproduce the great Orthodox or Roman liturgies, nor recreate the pentecostal revivalism of the mid-19th century shouting and crawling Methodists. It will encourage a creative outpouring of fresh music and liturgy. It will set out to make the excitement and drama of apocalyptic an integral part of the experience of all Christians.

Multistaff Adventist congregations will hire ministers of worship to fashion church services that demonstrate the power of the apocalyptic vision to evoke the presence of God. Such ministers will explore Sabbath liturgical celebrations.

Adventist congregations will commission the most creative architects of our time to make of new Adventist churches the freshest statements of the apocalyptic vision of which they are capable. Special trust funds will provide scholarships to

the most talented of our young people to take up the arts as a religious vocation—not just music, but architecture, sculpture, and painting; not just the producing of oratorios, but novels, plays, and feature-length films.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian priest who wrote the now-classic work, *Theology of Liberation,* opened a lecture a few years ago by saying, "First there is prayer, then revolution."[4] First there is singing, then marching—in Selma, Alabama; in Gdansk, Poland; in Johannesburg, South Africa. "Only where there is doxology," says Walter Brueggeman, "can there be justice, for such songs transfigure fear into energy."[5]

A contemporary Adventism, its experience revitalized and expanded by encountering the risen Christ of the apocalypse—a cosmic Christ reasserting his rule over rebellious principalities, powers, and kingdoms—is transported to the frontiers of social and political change. A contemporary Adventism true to its apocalyptic vision shows no patience for merely conserving. It calls for change—deep and sweeping—not merely in the church, but in society.

Transforming the church is not as important as changing society. The crisis of our time eclipses the crisis in our church.

Indeed, the calls for reform from many Adventists—including this one—have often been too inward. Including more lay persons on denominational committees, eliminating unions, and creating a full-fledged North American Division are all needed. But transforming the church is not as important as changing society. The crisis of our time eclipses the crisis in our church.

As a denomination we are worried about preserving our system of health-care institutions in North America. And, indeed, they are valuable. But we should go further. We should be planning how our health-care institutions can change society. Why not, as we did in our early days, try the impossible—and do it! Perhaps our Adventist health system could take as a mission the eradication of some major threat to health: for example, reducing infant mortality rates in three selected cities in North America; or, reducing the rate of teenage suicide in the cities with the five largest concentrations of Adventist hospital beds; or, successfully leading statewide campaigns to get handguns banned—and fewer people into hospital emergency rooms. Or, pioneering with the first chain of low-cost hospices for those suffering and dying from AIDS.

It is not good enough for a group as creative, committed, and able as the members of the Association of Adventist Forums to merely urge the leadership of the church to take action—and complain when it doesn't. The Adventist Forum, should act now to demonstrate ways in which Adventism can fulfill its potential in our time.

For example, the Association of Adventist Forums could set out immediately to foster new expressions of the apocalyptic imagination: the composition of hymns, symphonies, cantatas, and oratorios expressing the apocalyptic vision; the writing of plays—both comic and serious—capturing the Adventist experience. The result might be not only foster the renewal of Adventist worship, but also make significant contributions to the worship experience of all Christians.

It may also be time for members of the Association of Adventist Forums to demonstrate their apocalyptic vision by undertaking a challenge worthy of their abilities: confronting in the court of world opinion totalitarian governments violating the human rights of believers—for example, those regimes that imprison Sabbathkeepers who insist on keeping the Sabbath by not sending their children to school on Saturday.

Where is God? Many of us have moments, like my mother, when we wonder why God is absent, when we despair, when we are lonely beyond speaking. We are modern persons. But somehow in our small, tight darkness, we have seen a great light. We have been warmed by Sabbath fellowship. We have glimpsed divinity in the passion of 19th century spirituality and the cosmic imagery of the *Apocalypse*.

The Adventist church in our time is to embody the apocalyptic vision: a community whose disappointments are overwhelmed by its experience of the divine; a church empowered by God's pres-

ence. The Adventist church is to be a visionary vanguard, revolutionaries of the imagination, propelled into action, shattering the routines of oppression with the shock of the holy.

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1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

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3. Uriah Smith, *Review and Herald* (September 23, 1862), p. 130.

4. American Academy of Religion national conference, 1984.

5. Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 27.