



what it's all about . . .

In baptism, I experience God's presence.

In worship, we meet Him together.

worship

journey into God's presence

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Does your congregation know the way into the presence of God? Is there a road map for the journey? Uncertain answers may motivate you and your congregation to dream about worship renewal.

1 Finding a Biblical Model for Christian corporate worship

The encounter between Cleopas and his fellow traveller with the stranger on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35) is one clear map for our journey into God's presence. Our worship, like theirs that day, takes shape around four themes.¹

Stage One—The Gathering

"Jesus himself came up and walked along with them" (Luke 24:15).

Like Cleopas, perhaps bowed under heavy burdens, we take our first few steps. The doors of our hearts open. Jesus draws near. The distractions begin to melt away. This *Gathering* is not always inevitably sad or painful. Some *Gatherings* in Scripture take our breath away (eg, 2 Chron 5:12-14). They bring us into the presence of God and prepare us to hear His Word. Worship leaders who understand this, will banish the dreaded expression "preliminaries". We will become more aware of how music, other creative arts, and warm-hearted hosting can take us on the journey into God's presence.

Stage Two—"The Burning Heart" —Hearing the Word

"Did not our hearts burn within us. . ." (Luke 24:32)

Imagine Cleopas hearing Jesus "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, explaining to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself." Our hearts burn when in the experience of

worship at its best we hear "*the recitation of God's mighty deeds of salvation*" (Webber, page 52). Worship leaders as well as preachers have an enormous responsibility here, for it's not only in preaching that we experience the "Burning Heart."

Stage Three—"The Lord is Risen" —Meeting Jesus with Thanksgiving at the Table

"Then their eyes were opened and they recognised Him." (Luke 24:31)

Cleopas knew Jesus in the breaking of the bread. We know Him supremely in that experience. No other experience in worship that "can equal the intensity of Table worship. We literally enter into the unrepeatable historic event of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and our life in faith is empowered by the pattern of death of resurrection...having communed with Him, we go forth with an eternal 'thank You' on our lips" (Webber, page 79). All the beauty of thanksgiving, testimony, even prayers for healing in worship, cluster around this theme of table and thanksgiving.

Stage Four—Going Forth Into the World

"They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem." (Luke 24:33)

Worship for us as for Cleopas ends in action. Transformed lives are filled with the desire to go and tell others.

2 Understanding our worship roots

Let us explore what Rex Miller has called the Millennium Matrix²—a useful way of finding our place in the tapestry of Christian worship. Miller divides the history of Christian worship into four eras, each defined by the predominant modes of communication of their time,

and each having an ongoing impact on Christian society.

Oral—until about 1500 AD

Print—from 1500s until 1950s

Broadcast—from 1950s until 2000

Interactive—since the explosion of interactive communication around 2000, symbolised by the World Wide Web.

Worship communities that suit the cultural moment grow best. Understanding the changing modes of communication over 2000 years can make us less inclined to judge the worship practices and preferences of others.

In exploring the main theological ideas and worship forms associated with each era, we must be charitable, looking for the best in each. Each one is represented somewhere in Seventh-day Adventism, now a world-wide, and multi-cultural denomination.

Oral/Liturgical Worship.

Developed in the context of a stylised ceremony for devout, but often non-literate believers, liturgical worship centres on visual rituals and symbols, highlighting the experience of the Lord's Supper. Worship functions like an intricately scripted play, adopting a rhythm reflecting the passing of a whole year in which events in the life of Jesus are played out. Liturgical worship often appeals to those in the Adventist family who loves church history and the arts. The sermon will be short, while the repetitive and artistic elements of word, song and prayer will make a major impact.

Print/Reformed Worship.

The influence of the printing revolution was striking. Faith and theology became the subjects of widespread mass communication. Worship materials were

circulated in print. Newly accessible Bibles prayer books and hymnals became essential to the worship experience. Christian mission was accompanied by a commitment to literacy because Christianity was now the religion not only of the person Jesus but also of the book.

“Print/reformed” worship is sermon oriented, designed to reinforce the reasonableness of the faith. The validity of the Bible and commitment to Jesus become important themes. Music centres on hymns rather than liturgical chants.

Seventh-day Adventist worship has been overwhelmingly “print/reformed”. That style has often been regarded as a fundamental tenet of the faith. Variations have been resisted almost as vigorously as variations in belief. Should matters of worship and communication *style* really be debated at the same level as matters of *doctrine* and *faith*?

Broadcast/Celebration Worship.

Utilising some of the communication styles developed in radio and television, the “celebration” worship, as described by Miller, has contributed with personal passion, an open expression of faith, and an energetic outpouring of praise. Rather than emphasising “ceremony” (liturgical) or “the sermon” (print/reformed), this worship is an “event” with a more even spread of activity. It incorporates motivational preaching, a variety of musical forms, and personal involvement in prayer and testimony. Much effective Adventist church planting in the western world employs broadcast/celebration style worship. Major youth ministry events have utilised this style for decades.

Interactive/Inclusive/Convergent Worship.

Miller characterises the present era as “interactive/inclusive/convergent.” In the new and shrunken world of interactivity and the World Wide Web, the conviction is that small is beautiful. Denominational labels are seen as less relevant, while the capacity to interact with one another and with God is very important.

Adventist worship with its high appreciation for content and distinctiveness will

need to understand this. The worship event is a “gathering” rather than a carefully prepared and produced “event.” Interaction and dialogue become the prevailing modes of communication. “The ability to select and mix different styles of music during the service will allow congregations to use established meaningful music and tailor it for the worship moment. There will also be simpler services and ‘unplugged,’ acoustical worship balancing highly technical productions. Worship will move from audience participation to audience collaboration in a stimulating and intimate experience.”

Adventist congregations reflecting this approach to worship communication and community building, can be found on every continent. On the world wide web, Adventist churches from Sydney to Seattle to Riga, Latvia, are drawing third millennium people—via their computer screens—into fellowship with others and connection with God.

3 Plotting Your Worship Course in the Third Millennium

Adventist congregations vary enormously in size, worshipping in homes, retirement villages, and schools, as well as in churches. Given such diversity, issues of worship style can never be prescribed by denominational headquarters or conference session votes. Congregations must find their own consensus, and the discussion must be mission driven rather than simply “comfort-zone” driven. Instead of “what do I like?” the defining questions ought to be “who are we trying to reach?” and “what insights do we have about the communication styles that will lead them into God’s presence?”

The central motifs of the worship journey taken by Cleopas provide a way for Adventist worship leaders worldwide to find a consensus that is spiritual rather than cultural, theological rather than stylistic. The beating heart of Adventist worship is revealed in the four elements from the Emmaus road.

The Gathering may be short or long, contemporary or traditional. But let Adventist worship leaders maintain their passion to move people from the troubles and triumphs of the weekly

road onto the way to the heart of God. The journey can be via the hymns of their childhood, the songs of their youth, or the music of today.

The Burning Heart that has heard the Word, can be set on fire by a variety of communication modes and styles -

- ▶ The Word in the hearts and mouths of passionate preachers
- ▶ The Word in the mouths of skilled readers or actors
- ▶ The Word shown by cameras of committed Christian media specialists
- ▶ The Word in the eyes and hands of visionary Christian artists
- ▶ The Word in the voices or sounds of musicians and their instruments

Thanksgiving. The celebration of the risen Lord at the table, with thanksgiving coming from the hearts of worshippers, deserves more attention in Adventist worship. Might we be drawn closer to God if we more intentionally and frequently associated the Lord’s Supper with the spiritual milestones of our congregations? On worship days without the Lord’s Supper, can we provide more opportunities for thanksgiving?

Going out into the world. In benediction we acknowledge God’s intense desire to go with us into the world. We accept the conferring of his presence on us. Baptism is another worship arena where the going out into the world can assume a much higher profile.

Adventists are uniquely poised to fulfil a noble mission, captured by the vision of an angel flying high in the heavens, calling the world’s inhabitants to “worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Rev 14:6-7). We have three incomparable blessings to share: the gospel that enables us to touch and heal the most wounded spirits; the Sabbath - richest of days for a worship context; and a vision of the future that bathes our worship in hope. ■

1 From Robert Webber, *Worship, Journey into His Presence* (Mansfield, PA: Kingdom Publishing, 1999).

2 Miller, Rex, “The Millennium Matrix: Progressions of Change,” Chapter Four of a forthcoming book. Access on the World Wide Web at www.futureworship.com.