

# **Heavenly Worship: Actualizing the Vision**

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**Andrews University Music and Worship Conference**

**March 4, 2006**

Shortly after I first preached the five-minute sermon on Isaiah's call vision as a young Seminary student, I moved to my first pastoral district in Northern Arizona. In that little mountain town of Flagstaff, I wrestled with how to make the elements of worship that flowed from Isaiah 6 a reality in the worship service of our country church. I found that the different parts of the traditional worship service could be correlated with the various components of Isaiah's "heavenly" model for worship. I was overjoyed as I saw the powerful difference it made for there to be an intentionality about our worship, a conscious moving through the major elements of worship in our order of service. I needed to do some teaching, moderating of the service (even interrupting at times to wake us out of our thoughtless "going through the motions"), as we introduced the concepts and reinforced them from week to week. As the whole experience of worship, joining earth and heaven, began to dawn upon the minds and hearts of the congregation, there was a revitalization of the worship experience. I can testify from personal experience to the results of intentionally actualizing the vision of heavenly worship in a local church.

Here is a sample of how the various parts of our more traditional worship service can be

correlated with the major elements of “heavenly” worship:

### **Modern Order/Elements of Worship Correlated with Isaiah’s vision**

1. Vision of God (Beauty, Praise, Holiness)  
“Enter His Gates With Thanksgiving”: Hymns/anthems of praise  
(join the heavenly angels in singing)  
Organ Prelude  
Introit: “The Lord is in His holy Temple” (Habakkuk 2:20a)  
Scripture/call to worship  
Invocation of God’s presence
2. Reverence/Humility  
Time of silent meditation: “Let all the earth keep silence before  
Him” (Habakkuk 2:20b)  
Psalm of Penitence/Confession  
Kneeling/bowing in reverence (ministers enter, prayer)  
Pastoral prayer of response to vision  
of God; acknowledge God’s majestic holiness, express  
confession/repentance.
3. Salvation/Forgiveness-Cleansing/Vitality  
Pastoral prayer (continued)—claiming of forgiveness  
Scripture presentation of Gospel message  
Hymn/anthem/songs of experience (“spiritual songs”)  
Testimonies/spiritual fellowship  
[Tithes and Offerings]
4. Illumination/Proclamation of the Word  
Scripture reading/responsive reading  
Children’s story  
Anthem or Special Music (along theme of sermon)  
Sermon
5. Enlistment/Dedication  
[Public Call to dedication]  
Hymn of dedication (or Special Music)  
[Tithes and Offerings]  
Benediction

Note that this is only one suggestion how various elements of the worship experience can be incorporated into the order of service; it must be recognized that the elements of worship

often occur simultaneously and/or are sustained throughout the service and thus cannot be rigidly sequenced in the worship order.

Worship leaders/committees should be encouraged to creatively plan worship services utilizing contemporary worship styles that foster the elements and order of worship experience suggested by Isaiah 6 but in unique and compelling settings and configurations. A sample of how this is done, actually using the model of Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4-5, is given in Robert Webber's book, *Planning Blended Worship*. The entire book suggests how contemporary worship can follow the steps of the "heavenly" worship model. An Adventist educator (Ellen White) caught this vision already in the nineteenth century: "Our meetings should be made intensely interesting. They should be pervaded with the very atmosphere of heaven. . . . His service should be made interesting and attractive, and not be allowed to degenerate into a dry form."<sup>1</sup> One possible element of variety not often followed in most Seventh-day Adventist worship services is to have spirited personal testimonies on some Sabbaths instead of a regular sermon. A voice from our Adventist heritage, White was far ahead of the times, urging this practice for the Sabbath morning worship service :

There are times when it is fitting for our ministers to give on the Sabbath, in our churches, short discourses, full of the life and love of Christ. But the church members are not to expect a sermon every Sabbath. . . . Let church members, during the week, act their part faithfully, and on the Sabbath relate their experience. The meeting will then be as meat in due season, bringing to all present new life and fresh vigor. When God's people see the great need of working as Christ worked for the conversion of sinners, the testimonies borne by them in the Sabbath service will be filled with power. With joy they will tell of the precious experience they have gained in working for others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>White, 5T 609.

<sup>2</sup>White, 7T 19.

Worship teams may experiment with other suggestions which incorporating fresh innovations but retain the basic elements of worship outlined above. It may be appropriate to vary the order of service from time to time, or even one special Sabbath a month to move from a more traditional order of service to a more innovative and contemporary one. God will lead us to vital worship in Spirit and in truth!

### **General Balancing Principles**

Along with examining the various basic elements of the worship experience, as we have done in the preceding sections, I believe it is also beneficial to set forth some basic balancing principles of worship that may be derived from the Isaiah 6 “heavenly” model of worship. Here are seven general balancing principles that I would urge every worship team or worship committee to consider as they are planning their worship services, in order to faithfully actualize the biblical vision of heavenly worship:

#### **1. Spontaneity and Liturgical Form**

In Isaiah 6 we find liturgical form, with the seraphim’s antiphonal singing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and covering their faces and bodies in reverence. There is also the divine throne in its place, and the functioning of the heavenly altar of incense. But at the same time in the worship experience there is spontaneity—the reaction of Isaiah to the beatific vision of God and also his response to God’s questions.

In the Old Testament records regarding the Mosaic sanctuary and its services, as described in the Pentateuch, every detail of the building and services were minutely directed by

God. There was attention to exact ritual form, which if violated, brought severe, even fatal, consequences (e.g., Nadab/Abihu, Lev 10). Yet, on the other hand, the Psalms contain many descriptions of the heart-felt and experience of the worshiper at the sanctuary, especially David's spontaneous response to God in song, prayer, emotions. We need the combination of Pentateuch and Psalms: liturgical form ("high church") and spontaneous experience ("celebration" church).

I still remember visiting the "Tallest Church in the World" in Chicago, while I was a seminary student. (The church was located in one of the downtown skyscrapers, many stories off the ground!) The pastor, Bob Pierce, was not only an effective preacher, but years before the current buzzword of "blended" worship existed, he knew how to plan a worship service combining the "common touch" with the most profound "high church" selections, which fed all the congregation. There was a Bach prelude played on a mighty pipe organ, a hearty congregational hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," intermingled tastefully with informal welcome time (handshakes all around the congregation), singing of "What A Friend We Have in Jesus" and a female black opera singer's powerful rendition of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow!" Galvanizing high class and middle class and lower class worshipers into a joyous unity, we all soared into heavenly places! Jo Ann and I worshiped as we had never done before. The more formal elements of worship were elegantly blended with the spontaneous. What wondrous worship! I believe our contemporary churches don't need to split off into "high" church and "contemporary/celebration" church services; Bob Pierce showed me how it is possible to blend services to unite all worshipers in glorious formal-spontaneous worship!

## 2. Joy and Awe

In Isaiah 6, there was much joy, epitomized by the fervid praise of the seraphim. At the same time there was solemn awe, as the seraphim covered their faces, and as Isaiah responded in humility and reverence. Psalm 2:11 succinctly expresses this balancing principle : “Serve the Lord with fear, and *rejoice with trembling*.”

God a lover of celebration. We find over ninety days of festivals in Jewish calendar year, all ordained by God! In connection with the highlight of the yearly festivals (the week-long Feast of Booths or Tabernacles), there is even a divine *command* to rejoice! Leviticus 23:40: “You shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days!” That’s my favorite command in the Bible!

At the same time, worship was a solemn occasion. The Psalmist states: “Serve the Lord with *fear* [*awe*]; rejoice with *trembling*” (Psalm 2:11). In worship we recognize the awesome majesty and infinite power of the King; we remember that “Our God is a consuming fire” (Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29) that would instantly consume us if it were not for the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus who was “consumed” on the altar of Calvary in our place.

Thus our worship will keep a balance between joy and awe. It will be a holy joy. Like much Hebrew music, which is in minor key giving that awesome depth, yet with a rapid tempo, giving it joy—our worship must have awesome depth, not shallow froth, yet vibrant joy.

I believe that this principle is one of the most potent in testing the worship of a congregation for balance. Many “celebration” style worship services incorporate only the upbeat, joyous, dimensions of worship, emphasizing acceptance and affirmation and love. But

there is little or no recognition of one's sinfulness, one's creatureliness in the presence of a holy God, that calls forth awe and reverence. On the other hand, the more "high church" models are often heavy with serious, awe-inspiring music but lack the exuberant sense of joy and celebration that characterized Old Testament worship. Why settle for one or the other? We need *both* awe and joy. I suggest we creatively blend them as the worship services naturally flows through the steps of approaching a holy God with awe and then experiencing the joy of receiving His forgiving/cleansing touch.

### **3. Earth and Heaven**

In Isaiah 6 Isaiah is worshiping in the earthly Jerusalem temple; but his vision carries him to the heavenly Holy of Holies. The seraph with the coal also links heaven to earth, as does the dialogue between God and Isaiah.

Today, though there is not direct vision as with Isaiah, we nevertheless "have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, and to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven. . . . and to Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant . . ." (Heb 12:22-24). We should remember that our worship is really conducted in the heavenly sanctuary! Our eyes of faith look into the heavenly sanctuary!

I believe that the "worship in heaven" model is especially appropriate for Seventh-day Adventists, who with their heavenly sanctuary doctrine find in Scripture that in these last days we have been called to by faith come to God in the heavenly sanctuary and join Him in His

saving work for humankind. We believe that Jesus is preparing “rooms/mansions” in the Father’s house—a term for the heavenly sanctuary— and will soon return to take us home to live forever in that sanctuary. According to Rev 21, the whole New Jerusalem will be the counterpart of the Holy of Holies, “the tabernacle of God” in the shape of a cube as the Holy of Holies (vss. 2-3,16). In the meantime, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. With this rich understanding of sanctuary typology, especially should Seventh-day Adventists recognize how our earthly worship must reflect the worship in the heavenly sanctuary.

#### **4. Distance (Transcendence) and Presence (Immanence)**

In Isaiah 6, there is distance or transcendence: the Lord is high and lifted up seated on His heavenly throne. Yet there was Presence (or immanence): the seraph brings the coal to touch Isaiah’s lips, and Yahweh dialogues personally with him. True worship must combine both a sense of God’s awesome transcendent holy otherness, and at the same time this very Transcendent One invites the worshiper into personal, intimate relationship with Him.

#### **5. Emotion (Feeling) and Cognition (Rational Faculties)**

In Isaiah 6 we find emotion—the vision of the heavenly sanctuary was saturated with sensory experience and emotional response. At the same time cognition was involved—God proclaimed His Word to Isaiah, and called for a cognitive as well as emotional response. The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the wholistic unity of mind and body will be reflected in

the worship service, with *both* emotion and reason involved, in balance. Not cold academic “high” church nor emotionalistic “celebration” church,” but a “blended” worship service in which both the emotions and the reason are employed together in expressing the “worship” of God.

## 6. Old and New

In Isaiah 6, the seraphim sang the same “old” message: “Holy, holy, holy,” but Isaiah responded with a fresh new response. In the Psalms we find the well-known hymns, yet several times in Scripture we find a call to “Sing unto the Lord a new song!”<sup>3</sup> So in our worship services, traditional styles and forms can be blended with new songs and styles of worship, without sacrificing biblical standards. The keynote of our services must be refreshing newness and life, not dead old forms. As one writer stated it: “We must live for Christ minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day; then Christ will dwell in us, and when we meet together, his love will be in our hearts, welling up like a spring in the desert, refreshing all, and making those who are ready to perish, eager to drink of the waters of life.”<sup>4</sup> In order to effectively blend the old and new in worship, studies like those of Webber are especially helpful.<sup>5</sup> His subtitle, *The Creative Mixture of Old and New*, indicates the direction of his study. Webber gives some very helpful suggestions of the kinds of “old” and “new” that can be blended in a contemporary setting, while

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<sup>3</sup>Ps 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10 See also a number of references where the worshiper(s) sing a “new song”: Ps 40:3; 144:9; Rev 5:9; 14:3.

<sup>4</sup>White, 5T 609.

<sup>5</sup>Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*.

following the Isaiah 6 (Rev 4-5) “worship in heaven” model.

## **7. Shared Christian Heritage and Denominational Distinctives**

In Isaiah 6 we find aspects of the gospel shared widely within the heritage of Christianity: the emphasis upon the transcendent holy character of God, the plan of salvation with the cleansing forgiving work of the coal from the altar. At the same time, for Seventh-day Adventists, there is an emphasis upon truths that are little emphasized within Christianity at large but emphasized within Seventh-day Adventist doctrine: the heavenly sanctuary as a spatio-temporal reality and not just a metaphor and God’s ongoing work in His heavenly temple.

We must wrestle with the order and components of worship, seeking to combine the basic elements of biblical worship in the “present truth” setting of the sanctuary message. Indeed, we must develop a unique Adventist worship that represents the distinctive message we present. The book by Raymond Holmes provides pioneering work in this direction,<sup>6</sup> but there is need of much more careful and creative thinking and application. We have precious truths that must be celebrated and incorporated into our corporate worship experience as well as into our doctrinal statements and individual lives. These truths should revolutionize not only our corporate worship, but should shape our whole lives as we worship in the broader sense of a way of life devoted in service to God.

For those in other Christian traditions, the same principle is applicable. Distinctive

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<sup>6</sup>Raymond Holmes, *Sing a New Song: Worship Renewal for Adventists Today* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1984), chaps. 4-7.

doctrines that set apart different denominations may be celebrated and highlighted in the worship service, to the glory of God.

### **Conclusion**

The essence of worship is highlighted in the English etymology of the word: “worthship,” ascribing worth to God after sensing His attributes of holiness and greatness. It is encapsulated in the main Hebrew word for worship--*hishtahawah*, “bending low” before our Maker, recognizing and acknowledging His holiness and our creatureliness, submitting to His sovereignty, responding to His majestic presence.

While my wife Jo Ann was completing her doctoral studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, I was invited to accompany her at a weekend spiritual retreat for doctoral students. That first evening, after a rousing song service of spiritual, experience-centered songs, keynote speaker Carl F. H. Henry, the dean of evangelical theologians (founder and long-time editor of *Christianity Today* magazine), stood up to speak. He started out with words that shocked us all: “That was a nice song service; but we never yet worshiped; when are we going to worship?” He went on to describe songs of real worship as those which focus upon ascribing glory to God and His attributes: songs whose message is “He is,” not “I feel.” He pointed us to the great paeans of praise by the heavenly beings in Isa 6, and Revelation 4 and 5. I began to understand that day better than ever before that worship is not something that I *get* out of coming to church, but something I *give* to God in adoration of His awesome “worthship.”

What is real worship, “heavenly” worship? In sum: God appears in His majestic holiness, amid the praises of his creatures; we are awed and sense our unworthiness and

defilement; He sends the cleansing coal; He proclaims His Word; we respond in dedicated service.

The end-time mandate in the three angels' messages of Revelation 14 calls for radical revival of true worship: "Worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water." (vs. 6). God has given us a model for heavenly worship in Isaiah 6, and this is elaborated in Rev 4-5).

**Revelation 4:1** Then as I looked, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the same voice I had heard before spoke to me with the sound of a mighty trumpet blast. The voice said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after these things." <sup>2</sup> And instantly I was in the Spirit, and I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it! <sup>3</sup> The one sitting on the throne was as brilliant as gemstones-- jasper and carnelian. And the glow of an emerald circled his throne like a rainbow. <sup>4</sup> Twenty-four thrones surrounded him, and twenty-four elders sat on them. They were all clothed in white and had gold crowns on their heads. <sup>5</sup> And from the throne came flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder. And in front of the throne were seven lampstands with burning flames. They are the seven spirits of God. <sup>6</sup> In front of the throne was a shiny sea of glass, sparkling like crystal. In the center and around the throne were four living beings, each covered with eyes, front and back. <sup>7</sup> The first of these living beings had the form of a lion; the second looked like an ox; the third had a human face; and the fourth had the form of an eagle with wings spread out as though in flight. <sup>8</sup> Each of these living beings had six wings, and their wings were covered with eyes, inside and out. Day after day and night after night they keep on saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty-- the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come." <sup>9</sup> Whenever the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the one sitting on the throne, the one who lives forever and ever, <sup>10</sup> the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one who lives forever and ever. And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, <sup>11</sup> "You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created everything, and it is for your pleasure that they exist and were created."

**Revelation 5:1** And I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. There was writing on the inside and the outside of the scroll, and it was sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a strong angel, who shouted with a loud voice: "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and unroll it?" <sup>3</sup> But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll and read it. <sup>4</sup> Then I wept because no one could be found who was worthy to open the scroll and read it. <sup>5</sup> But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has conquered. He is worthy to open the scroll and break its seven seals." <sup>6</sup> I looked and I saw a Lamb that had been killed but was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God that are sent out into every part of the earth. <sup>7</sup> He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one sitting on the

throne.<sup>8</sup> And as he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense-- the prayers of God's people!<sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song with these words: "You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were killed, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."<sup>10</sup> And you have caused them to become God's Kingdom and his priests. And they will reign on the earth."<sup>11</sup> Then I looked again, and I heard the singing of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and the living beings and the elders.<sup>12</sup> And they sang in a mighty chorus: "The Lamb is worthy-- the Lamb who was killed. He is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing."<sup>13</sup> And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They also sang: "Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever."<sup>14</sup> And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped God and the Lamb.

Heavenly worship: Let's actualize the vision here on earth!