

Christian Worship and Cultural Diversity: A Missiological Perspective

By Bruce L. Bauer

This article will look at two topics that engender a lot of debate and disagreement—worship and culture. There are several important questions that need to be addressed. How can worship remain biblical and still be culturally relevant? What are some of the biblical principles that should guide people in all cultures in their expression of worship? How has American culture dominated Adventist worship forms? Why is it important to worship God in culturally relevant ways rather than having a one size fits all approach to worship? In other words, can Adventist worship be expressed in a diversity of ways and still be biblical?



Bruce L. Bauer is Chair of the Mission Department at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He and his wife spent 23 years as missionaries in Asia.

I will begin with a couple of definitions. First, worship is defined as reverence or devotion for a deity, religious homage or veneration (*Webster's New World Dictionary* 1984, s.v. "worship"). The vast majority of the words for worship in English Bibles are translated from the Hebrew word *shachah* and the Greek word *proskuneo*. Both words mean to bow down or prostrate oneself before a superior or before God (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* 1979, s.v. "worship"). When I lived in Japan people bowed to show respect and the deeper the bow the more respect that was intended. Bowing in worship is an external form revealing an inner attitude of a desire to show honor.

Second, culture is defined as "the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values" (Hiebert 1985:30). This definition has implication for this discussion because worship is integrated and intertwined with many cultural ideas, feelings, and values. When a person becomes a follower of Jesus Christ there are many areas that need to be impacted by the biblical message because of this integration of cultural values.

Impact of Culture on Worship

When people worship, it is through their local culture that they express their faith in God and praise their Lord and Savior through words and images shaped by cultural meanings, feelings, and values.

Our culture is also the vehicle through which we understand God's voice and are molded into his likeness. We recognize God's power when he comes to us in a way we understand. We can respond to his voice as he speaks in a language we know. God is certainly not defined by our culture, but our incarnational Lord chooses to speak through it. (Kimsey 2008)

Culture is also responsible for distorting our perception and understanding of God, so while God can and must speak through each local culture that very culture can also distort biblical worship practices by shaping them in ways that are cultural rather than biblical. There are countless cultural forms that have been adapted from various cultures and that are part of traditional Christian worship. We think nothing of having pulpits, pews, choir robes, speaking from raised platforms, using felt sets and pictures of Jesus and his disciples, but all these forms are cultural, not biblical, and can shape and even distort our picture of God (Harper and Metzger 2009:33, 34).

African Traditional Religion's Impact on "Christian" Worship

In Africa, there is no doubt that African Traditional Religions (ATRs) have also impacted the

current Christian worship scene. ATRs are generally concerned with insuring that people have good health and prosperity, and are enjoying fulfillment, honor, and progeny (Tiéno 2000:47). ATRs claim to answer questions as to what caused a misfortune, who is responsible for bringing calamity on the family? Why did the crops fail? (Mbiti 1970:224-226). What is interesting and alarming is that many Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches, and even Catholic priests have adopted and taken over the roles played by the traditional fetish priest or diviner. For example, ATR followers worship through intermediaries with the diviner communicating with the Supreme God, then instructing the supplicant on the course of action to follow in order to receive protection or overcome a problem. Many Pentecostal church leaders have adopted this same role by the leaders claiming to be a prophet, to have direct communication channels with God, and to be able to receive a word from the Lord to guide in solving and informing concerning everyday matters of concern to their members.

Just a few years ago Southern Africa's Catholic bishops warned Catholic priests

to stop moonlighting as witchdoctors, fortune tellers and traditional healers, and to rely on Christ for miracles. . . . The bishops ordered priests to "desist from practices involving spirits," and to steer clear from witchcraft, fortune telling and selling spiritual powers or "magic medicines." (Independent Online 2006)

In some interesting research conducted in Côte d'Ivoire Sasha Newell found that Pentecostal leaders often used the same worldview value system that linked witchcraft and curses to illnesses and misfortunes. Newell argues that Pentecostalism has become an alternate form of witchcraft using many of the same techniques and practices found in the traditional religions (Newell 2007:462).

Some Pentecostal church pastors act almost like the fetish priests in their roles as intermediaries between the people and God. They give directions and "words" from God that answer the questions that are often prompted by a worldview that looks for the evil forces that prevent people from enjoying health and prosperity (Tiénou 2000:47).

Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye of the Redeemed Church claims five million followers in Nigeria and 250,000 abroad. Once a month he holds all-night revival meetings that attract 300,000 people who call him "Daddy." When Eve Akindabe was asked why she left the Anglican Church to join Adeboye's Redeemed Church she said, "take a look around," . . . waving her hands at the crowds.

Daddy inspires. Daddy tells us Jesus is right here to help improve our lives. The Anglican Church was all about, "Don't do this, don't do that." Daddy is all about possibilities and making breakthroughs. It deals with heaven, but also the here and now. (Swank 2006)

In these examples we see the

cultural view of how God interacts with people taking precedence over the biblical principles of worship. If this conference was dealing with American worship there would be a whole list of other cultural practices that have negatively impacted Christian worship.

Biblical Examples

We should not be surprised that culture has an influence on the worship practices of God's people. In the biblical record there are numerous examples of the Israelites straying from the worship principles that God had given them and instead adopting the practices and the ways of the people in the surrounding cultures. How many times did Israel stray into Baal worship and follow the detestable practices of the people in the surrounding tribes? How many times did the groves and alters that imitated local cultural practices have to be destroyed? Even the biblical record illustrates the impact of culture on worship.

Biblical Principles for Worship

In order to avoid falling into the trap of adopting syncretistic cultural worship forms Adventist Church leaders and "worship leaders need to critique the culturally generated worship forms they use, asking whether each form enhances or degrades authentic worship" (Harper and Metzger 2009:34). In the African context there are several biblical principles that must

guide any discussion concerning diversity in worship.

Worship God Directly—Not Through Intermediaries

One of the most fantastic principles of the Christian faith is that God desires to be worshipped directly. Exodus 20:4-6 says it strongly—no intermediaries, no idols, no representations—worship God directly. The devil has worked overtime to confuse and convince people that God is distant and that there is a need for intermediary deities, spirits, and ancestors in order to communicate with and know the will of God. At the core of biblical

that they worship, but God expects exclusive worship—no dual allegiance. The challenge to this exclusive worship in many parts of Africa is that fear of witchcraft and fear of the ancestors is greater than fear of committing sin and going against this prohibition. Too many African Christians seem

to be more afraid of being bewitched than of committing sin. Belief in witchcraft is greater than belief in Christianity. To be bewitched is worse than anything else. It seems that, if pastoral workers could get the people to fear sin as much as they fear witches, evangelization would be much easier and more successful. (Healey and Sybertz 1996:293)

Many are willing to have the biblical God as one of the gods that they worship, but God expects exclusive worship—no dual allegiance.

worship is the revealed Word of God that informs and describes biblical worship. Perhaps there is something good in the Adventist practice of moving pastors from time to time since this practice obviously discourages any Adventist pastor from becoming a “daddy” figure.

Worship God Exclusively—Not Tolerating Dual Allegiances

The first commandment is very explicit: “You must not have any other god but me” (Exod 20:3 NLT). Many are willing to have the biblical God as one of the gods

Worldview change in this area is difficult and slow, but unless the allegiance to God is stronger than the fear of spirits or belief in the ancestors the church in Africa will continue to struggle with dual allegiance and dual allegiance saps the strength, vitality, and witness of God’s people.

Worship God Submissively—Not Through Magic or Manipulation

African Traditional Religions “focus on preventing misfortune and maximizing good fortune . . . [making] African religions

anthropocentric; that is, a major goal of African religions is to ensure the present well-being of humans and their communities. Harmony between spiritual and physical forces, the environment, and humans is the prerequisite for the well-being of the individual and the community” (Tié-nou 2000:47). This well being is sought through the mediation of the intermediaries and through sacrifice whereby the spirits are appeased or manipulated in order to ensure the desired outcome.

In a world filled with evil, suffering, and pain, bad things happen to both good and evil people.

adversity strikes, when prayers and medication do not heal, when crops fail and businesses go under, church members need to understand that the solution is not to search out an alternative power source, but to stand clearly on God’s side and say like Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 13:15). Believers need to understand the issues of spiritual warfare so clearly that they will reply like “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God

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The Adventist understanding of the Great Controversy theme between Christ and Satan needs to be carefully taught to help people understand that the biblical view of suffering and pain is different from the African Traditional Religions’ view that there is always a local cause for lack of well being. Christian worship has at its core the concept of submission—prostrating oneself before the Creator of the universe in humble submission.

Christians live in a wicked world where sickness, suffering, disease, and problems of many types afflict God’s people. When

we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Dan 3:16-18).

Submission in the face of adversity, submission in the face of pain, submission in the face of barrenness are topics rarely discussed or preached on in Pentecostal churches, but are they preached on in Adventist churches? If not, we have missed an important aspect of biblical teaching.

Impact of Dominant Cultures on Adventist Worship

Another factor that can have a negative impact on Adventist worship is to allow a foreign culture to dominate the worship forms and patterns of church life. This creates the very real danger that the church in the local culture will be viewed as foreign. In many countries today anything that smacks of foreignness creates additional barriers to the communication of the gospel. A basic missiological principle is that God can be worshipped in ways that are relevant and understandable within each local culture. “Christ commissioned his disciples to proclaim a faith and worship . . . that would be adapted to all peoples, nations, all classes” (White 1940:820).

National church leaders need to do much more to encourage local hymn writers to put into local music forms the great themes of the Bible, to use local instruments, to find local cultural forms that can carry the biblical message. North Atlantic hymn tunes are not required to worship and praise God. In some parts of Africa it is forbidden to sing any song for the worship hour if the hymn is not in the *Adventist Hymnal*. This type of slavish dependence on American forms alienates the younger generations and causes resentment.

This is an area that calls for balance. Adventists around the world share a common heritage filled with meaningful memories, historical events, and a prophetic understanding. This shared

heritage must be communicated to the next generation, but communication is always done best when using local forms and expressions.

Impact of Worship on Mission and Evangelism

Deciding how to worship in a particular cultural setting also impacts the church’s mission and outreach in a community for “more than any other activity . . . worship defines the relationship of the church to the world” (Van Gelder 2009). The last four years the Department of World Mission has been involved in a Doctor of Ministry program in Nigeria with thirty-four church leaders from West Africa. A common theme that was discussed was how Adventist midweek prayer meetings were almost empty while the Pentecostal midweek services were packed with many Adventist members attending. One of the differences is that prayer meetings in an Adventist church and during weeks of prayer are characterized with little praying but much preaching, whereas the other prayer meetings in town focus on prayer for the needs and concerns of those attending. People need to know truth—preaching, but they also need to realize that God is with them, will never forsake them, and is still interested and concerned in life here on this earth.

Recommendations

1. Since the weekly worship service in many parts of the world

is the church's face to the non-Christian society, worship must not only be biblical but must also be relevant and understandable to those in the local culture. This means that how the Adventist Church worships in Lagos will be different from how the church worships in Washington, DC. African church leaders have a special responsibility to encourage biblical relevance in each context.

2. The various cultures and languages of the world should be encouraged to develop and use local tunes, local instruments, and local idiomatic expressions to communicate Adventist themes like the Sabbath, the Second Coming, and God's protection and care.

3. Prayer for the sick and biblical responses to demonic activity should become regular aspects of Adventist worship. There is nothing to fear in these activities as long as they are done in biblically appropriate ways.

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