While a student at the SDA Theological Seminary I made a presentation on the religious basis for human rights and racial unity. I remember the rebuttal of one of my White classmates: “[To be a] slave in America wasn’t all that bad. After all, we did introduce you to God and Jesus Christ.” To this remark our teacher replied, “Er—mm, I don’t know that we can really claim that.”

Admittedly no one religion or culture from Africa remained the same as it existed there. Rather with time the African religious expressions yielded to a blending on alien soil toward new religious societies structured partly from their diverse African backgrounds and partly from their enslavement experience in a new environment.

Nevertheless, the fact that Christianity for African-Americans antedates that provided by White slavemasters breaks the psychological spell that credits Euro-American missionaries with introducing the Christian God to the African slaves, thus ascribing to Eurocentric thought absolute authority in determining the shape of Black liturgy and ritual. So worshiping on the plantation, for more slaves than traditionally published, was a matter of focusing on a God who was curiously familiar. Worship elements included praying, singing, preaching the Word, shouting, and communal fellowship.

Earliest Direct Influences

More specifically, worship by Black Seventh-day Adventists traces itself like a silver ribbon through the interdenominational Millerite movement of the early 1840s, highlighting such participants as William Still, a Black abolitionist who spent his life working with antislavery organizations and the Underground Railroad; William Ellis Foy, a Black minister who experienced visions relating to the early Advent movement and whose authenticity was confirmed by Ellen White; Charles Bowles, a Black Millerite minister; Sojourner Truth, a legendary antislavery activist who converted to Adventism; and John Lewis, a Black Advent minister.

During the period leading from the Millerite period to the great disappointment of 1844 to the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there was as yet no formal Black Adventist congregation. Thus there is a lack of descriptive accounts of Black Adventist worship services of the time.
Consequently, the worship style of the church in general likely characterized all Adventists, Black as well as White.

It may be assumed that when the first Black Seventh-day Adventist church came into being, in 1886 (Edgefield Junction, Tennessee), its approach to worship bore the stamp of its initial minister, Harry Lowe, who formerly pastored a Baptist church. Undoubtedly, Lowe himself was influenced by his Baptist background as well as what he understood or was taught to be normative worship by his new denomination. In the dominant culture of the Adventist Church, especially during the late 1840s and 1850s, fervent enthusiasm characterized worship until a more tempered style ensued by the 1870s.6

Reasons for this transition from more to less ecstatic worship forms have been given as: (1) a natural process caused by church members becoming increasingly educated and sophisticated, (2) cultural change in general on the American scene, and (3) evidence of abuses by extremists who fell into fanaticism, religiously and theologically, typified by the Mauston group in Wisconsin (1861) and the “holy flesh” movement in Indiana (1901).7

Nevertheless, to varying degrees from the 1840s to the turn of the century, Adventist worship included such verbal exclamatives as “Hallelujah!” “Praise God!” “Glory!” “Blessed Jesus!” and “Amen!” Additional spirited expressions included shouting, singing, laughing, speaking in tongues, and prostration, although tongues-speaking and laughing were evidenced much less often, and their infrequency might disqualify them as actual practices.8

Describing a service, Ellen G. White wrote: “Sunday the power of God came upon us like a mighty rushing wind. All arose upon their feet and praised God with a loud voice. It was something as it was when the foundation of the house of God was laid. The voice of weeping could not be told from the voice of shouting. It was a triumphant time. All were strengthened and refreshed. I never witnessed such a powerful time before.”9 On a different occasion she observed that “religion is made to dwell too much in an iron case. . . . The outpouring of the Spirit of God will lead to a grateful acknowledgment of the same; and . . . we shall not hold our peace, we shall sacrifice to God with the voice of thanksgiving and make melody to Him with our hearts and voices.”10

Reflecting on a meeting he had attended, James White reported: “Last night I felt more of the power of God than I have at any one time for three years. Brethren Ingraham, Sanborn, and I were praying in another room. While a brother was anointing his wife, the room was filled with the power of God. I was standing, but with difficulty. I fell upon my face, and cried and groaned under the power of God. Brethren Sanborn and Ingraham felt about the same. We all lay on the floor under the power of God. We are perfectly free.”11

When negative criticism was leveled at a certain enthusiastic worship meeting, James White defended the exuberance in the Review and Herald, dubbing the critics “lukewarm, deceived,” and “hardened.”12 Ellen White herself once declared: “I saw singing to the glory of God often drive the enemy, and shouting would beat him back and give us the victory. I saw there was too little glorifying God in Israel and too little childlike simplicity.”13

However, cautioning against extremes, Ellen White admonished that “there was great danger of leaving the Word of God and resting down and trusting in exercises.”14 Furthermore, one particular brother with the habit of shouting was depicted as not knowing “half of the time . . . what he is shouting at.”15 At any rate, sincere Black Adventist worshipers faced a challenge in discerning the difference between appropriate and inappropriate worship.

As general Adventist fellowship evolved into a more structured order, Black Adventist congregations, although familiar with the earlier enthusiastic modes of worship, generally reflected what its pastors and leaders asserted to be the standard denominational worship norm. In 1895 Ellen White warned against extreme emotionalism in Black assemblies: “Among most of the colored people we find unseemly practices in their worship of God. They become much excited, and put forth physical exertions that are uncalled for in the solemn worship of God. . . . Let not the colored people be excluded from the religious assemblies of the white people. They have no chance to exchange their superstitious exercises for a worship that is more sacred and elevating if they are shut out from association with intelligent white people who should give them an example of what they should be and do. . . . They conduct their worship according to the instruction they have received, and they think that a religion which has no excitement, no noise, no bodily exercises, is not worth the name of religion. These ignorant worshipers need instruction and guidance.”16

No doubt recently freed slaves were reaching out to God in the best manner they knew how. On the one hand, such worship forms would seem little different from the frontier revival worship genre of early Adventism as practiced by James White, Ellen White, and their fellow believers. On the other hand, we must suppose that what Ellen White addresses here among Blacks is the embodiment of an extravagance not unlike the Mauston group of Wisconsin and the Indiana holy flesh episodes. That she appeals for balance is clear when we recall her warning against the opposite extreme: “The evil of formal worship cannot be too strongly depicted.”17

Worship practices in their previous churches notwithstanding, Black Adventists apparently came to equate worship procedure and practice with the enlightening doctrinal teachings they had received and therefore came to terms with the majority denominational worship culture. The result was a gradual or not-so-gradual transition: hymns and
anthems generally superseded spirituals and religious folk songs, preaching tended to become more doctrinal than inspirational, and worship ritual and liturgy became more formal than informal.

“Separate but Equal”: Black SDA Worship During the First Half of the Twentieth Century

When in 1896 the Supreme Court of the United States, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, supported the constitutionality of “separate but equal” facilities for Whites and Blacks, the era of de jure racial segregation began dictating policy in American public schools, transportation, recreation, lodging, and eating facilities. The church, reflecting the society in which it abides, found it convenient to continue segregationist practices among members of the household of faith.

Although the Black SDA Church in the U.S. was structurally separate from White believers, it nevertheless followed the typical worship style of its White counterparts. During these formative days the Black SDA membership, which numbered 50 in 1894, increased to about 900 by 1909 and 3,500 by 1918.18 Black SDA believers were separate, but decidedly unequal, in church facilities and control of their programs and finances.

Emphasis placed on separateness by the church at large (with all the inherent injustices in the package), together with arguments by Blacks that their gospel work would enjoy greater progress if under more direct control by Blacks, sparked increased cravings by Black SDAs for self-governance. The mood became an organized movement when in 1929 a group under the leadership of J. K. Humphrey rebelled against church subordination. The movement organized as the United Sabbath Day Adventists.19 Seeds sown by this bold though extreme initiative sprouted thoughts of self-governance within existing church structures. Evidence of the advantages of such a move led to the first Black (regional) conferences less than 20 years later, in 1944.

This brief review of structural change of the Black church within Adventism suggests that the gradation was not about organizational configuration alone, but also about identifying norms within Blacks themselves for all church matters, including patterns of worship. These patterns were set for challenges ahead.

Choices: Factors Influencing Black Worship in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century

Four special events converged to affect Black Adventist worship beginning in the 1950s: 1. Oakwood College, the principal center for training Black ministers, became an accredited senior college offering four full years of ministerial study. 2. The Autumn Council of 1983 called for ministerial students to take at least one additional year of study at the SDA Theological Seminary after graduating from college. 3. Successes in the civil rights movement, among which was the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruling racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, opened doors to education and employment for African-American laypersons. 4. The increase of education among African-Americans created demands for a broader and more varied menu of worship styles. Each of these four historic developments had profound influence upon African-American Adventist preaching, music, and overall worship style.

How can we define worship so as to denote the ideal experience of God’s people in assembly? True worship begins to take place when people born of the divine Spirit, with purified and renewed minds, come together to know, love, and willingly obey God. Activities and procedures within a church service are mere forms to assist that reality. Is this not the underlying message of the psalmist—“O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart” (Ps. 95:6-8)?

The worship of African-American Adventists can probably best be described as a tug of choices between the traditional and the contemporary: “traditional preaching” focuses on doctrines and “keeping the faith,” and in some cases keeping the pulpit male; “contemporary preaching” stresses renewal, relating, and making the faith relevant to personal and professional demands of the so-called real world, with more of an openness to female ministers.

“Traditional church music” pivots on hymns, anthems, spirituals, and classics accompanied mostly by piano and organ and at times the violin; “contemporary church music” freely embraces gospel songs and modern styles that might even mirror popular secular sounds accompanied by a variety of instruments, including drums. While traditional worship bears clear linkage to a general consensus of what most consider distinctively Adventist—preaching and music in a context faithful to the *Church Manual*—contemporary worship is more flexible and tends to award spontaneity and involvement. During the 1980s a buzzword for contemporary worship became a part of our church family vocabulary—“celebration”—at once a positive or negative term depending on the person using it.

One thing for sure, by the 1990s deciding which particular Black Adventist church to attend has become increasingly a matter of choosing between the traditional and the contemporary worship styles.

Worship Hermeneutic for Now and the Twenty-first Century

Contrary to the age-old adage, all roads do not lead to Rome! As road maps and reliable directions prove invaluable to serious travelers, so serious worshipers find guide-
lines helpful in their corporate quest to experience and honor the divine. These guidelines are termed hermeneutics. Hermeneutics describes our search for meaning when we read the Bible and engage in the process of interpreting its message for our attitudes and actions. Are there reliable guidelines to be interpreted and understood for meaningful worship? Is there a worship paradigm for now and beyond?

While the Word of God is replete with worship principles from Genesis to Revelation, I would like to focus on an example found in John 4, where Jesus engages in conversation with a woman alongside a well on a Samaritan road. Four statements from their interchange formulate four prototypical principles of worship: perception, place, process, and person.

**Perception.** After Christ pointed the Samaritan woman to the divine grace of “better water,” she responded with deep reverence: “Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet” (verse 19). Perception, the God-given capacity to sense the presence of a power above yourself, is a prime requisite to purposeful encounter with Deity. Is God present? Am I experiencing His nearness? “The hour and place of prayer and the services of public worship” become “sacred because God is there.”

Like a thermometer controlling room temperature, an awareness of God’s presence can impress our taste for reverence rather than revelry, holiness rather than hollering, dignity rather than decadence, and true joy rather than thin joviality. “As a shield from temptation and an inspiration to purity and truth, no other influence can equal the sense of God’s presence.” Perceiving that the Divine is near is the first step in the process by which the worshiper is remade.

**Place.** Immediately following her perceptive observation that Jesus was a prophet, the Samaritan woman broached a religious controversy: “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain [Mount Gerizim]; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship” (verse 20). Jesus’ reply lifted her thoughts above matters of form and ceremony: “Woman, . . . the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father” (verse 21). External forms may assist, but must take second place to actual communion with God. Christ neither condemned the Samaritans’ Mount Gerizim nor conformed the Jews’ Jerusalem, both places clearly linked to racial heritage.

**Procedure.** Jesus continued with the words: “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (verse 23, NIV). These words of our Lord, in addition to pointing to the internal condition of the heart made new by the Spirit, suggest also that we give attention to worship methodology, liturgy, and ritual—or in a word, procedure. As Paul would later exhort in 1 Corinthians 14:40, that “all things be done decently and in order” (or “in a fitting and orderly way” [NIV]), so also Jesus Christ, at this moment of His conversation, was pinpointing the “how” of worship.

The “how” or procedure of worship is defined as the whole range of programming and activities within the service that enables it to experience movement from a given point to another. Jesus offers His imperative that worship be conducted “in spirit and in truth” or, in all sincerity, with the highest faculties of emotions and mind. A number of African-American Adventist pastors, teachers, and administrators have expressed themselves formally on worship procedure. I quote them below along with one White Adventist and one Black non-Adventist.

Discussing Adventist worship from the viewpoint of left-brain and right-brain functions, the former controlling intellect and the latter emotions, Saustin S. Mfune concludes that “activities that allow people to respond emotionally and physically as well as intellectually during the service make worship more meaningful and effective.”

Relating intellect and emotion directly to African-American SDA worship, James R. Doggett says that a “striking difference” exists between “evangelistic and regular church preaching,” probably to the disadvantage of the less celebrative and spontaneous and highly predictable regular church service; then he makes a case for preaching that is “both emotionally charged and intellectually engaging,” and for approaching worshipers “both on the cognitive and emotive pathways.”

Commenting on a videotape he made of a large congregation at worship, Louis Venden saw reflected in the faces of those worshipers—“boredom!” Their attitude “contrasted painfully” with the following statements by Ellen...
White: “Shall we not keep holy festivals unto God? Shall we not show that we have some enthusiasm in His service? . . . Let the school and the church henceforth have festivals of rejoicing unto the Lord.”26 “Our meetings should be made intensely interesting. They should be pervaded with the very atmosphere of heaven.”27

That Black Adventist worship functions in a broader context of Afrocentrism is affirmed by Harold Lee: “African-American congregations in general, and Black Seventh-day Adventist congregations in particular, are in their best and most authentic expressions informed by an Afrocentric perspective. While the term Afrocentric is relatively new, the historical reality of Black Christians, corporately and individually, whose perspective of the gospel message has been oriented within the context of the issues and needs of an African-centered worldview, is well documented.”28

Applying the relevance of cultural considerations to all ethnic groups regardless of national origin, Pedrito Maynard-Reid declares: “When people worship in an environment which reflects their daily life and recognize that the images and symbols of daily living have a religious and spiritual side to them, religion and worship will lose their abstraction. As the liturgy is couched in the common tongue, choreographed in local idioms, painted on a culturally relevant canvas, worship will be meaningful and comprehensible.”29

Benjamin Reaves appeals persuasively for worship to be “informed with theological integrity” lest “it become a source of corruption,” and he further challenges that “decisions . . . be made as to what is superfluous and what is of intrinsic value, what is legitimate and what is illegitimate.”30

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of two types of Black church worship services at extreme opposite ends of the pole: “One burns with emotionalism, and the other freezes with classism. The former, reducing worship to entertainment, places more emphasis on volume than on content and confuses spirituality with muscularity. The danger in such a church is that the members may have more religion in their hands and feet than in their hearts and souls. . . . The other type of Negro church . . . has developed a class system and boasts of its dignity, its membership of professional people, and its exclusiveness. In such a church the worship service is cold and meaningless, the music dull and uninspiring, and the sermon little more than a homily on current events. If the pastor says too much about Jesus Christ, the members feel that he is robbing the pulpit of dignity. If the choir sings a Negro spiritual, the members claim an affront to their class status. This type of church tragically fails to recognize that worship at its best is a social experience in which people from all levels of life come together to affirm their oneness and unity under God.”31

Of course, all worshipers cannot be expected to be clones or cookie-cutter participants in matters of respon-
20 Ibid., p. 255. (Italics supplied.)
21 This statement is found in the following work as a quotation, though with an inadvertent inaccuracy of its original source. Benjamin Franklin Reaves, “A Study of Black Seventh-day Adventist Worship” (Doctor of Ministry position and professional paper, Chicago Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 23.
22 Reaves, pp. 21, 25.