

God's Presence in the Sanctuary: A Theology of His Nearness

Angel Manuel Rodríguez

Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Faith #23: "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary. There is a sanctuary in heaven, the true tabernacle which the Lord set up and not man. In it Christ ministers on our behalf, making available to believers the benefits of His atoning sacrifice offered once for all on the cross. He was inaugurated as our great High Priest and began HIS intercessory ministry at the time of His ascension. In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2300 days, He entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry. It is a work of investigative judgment which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin, typified by the cleansing of the ancient Hebrew sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. In that typical service the sanctuary was cleansed with the blood of animal sacrifices, but the heavenly things are purified with the perfect sacrifice of the blood of Jesus. The investigative judgment reveals to heavenly intelligences who among the dead are asleep in Christ and therefore, in Him, are deemed worthy to have part in the first resurrection. It also makes manifest who among the living are abiding in Christ, keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, and in Him, therefore, are ready for translation into His everlasting kingdom. This judgment vindicates the justice of God in saving those who believe in Jesus. It declares that those who have remained loyal to God shall receive the kingdom. The completion of this ministry of Christ will mark the close of human probation before the Second Advent. (Heb. 8:1-5; 4:14-16; 9:11-28; 10:19-22; 1:3; 2:16, 17; Dan. 7:9-27; 8:13, 14; 9:24-27; Num. 14:34; Eze. 4:6; Lev. 16; Rev. 14:6, 7; 20:12; 14:12; 22:12.)"

At the very nucleus of the Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary is found the person and work of Christ for us as our High Priest. Adventists view His work in a holistic way as including His incarnation, earthly ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, His high-priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, and His return in glory. Christ is depicted as High Priest, Sacrifice, Savior, Mediator, and Judge. The theology of the sanctuary addresses both historical and theological concerns. In this article we will primarily deal with an aspect of its theological content, but first a word about its historical value.

Historical contribution

This article of faith is directly connected with the apocalyptic prophecy of Daniel 7 and 8 and the historical rise of the Adventist movement. This perspective claims that through the prophecies of Daniel and others, God was intentionally describing an important event in salvation history that was to take place at the end of the 2,300 evenings and mornings mentioned in Daniel 8:14. At that time the cleansing of the heavenly temple was to begin. This cleansing was to take place through Christ's work of judgment in the heavenly temple, leading to the parousia and the final resolution of the sin problem.

Meanwhile, here on earth God was raising a movement of restoration and reform whose particular goal was to prepare humanity for the return of Christ in glory through the proclamation of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12. The historical significance of the doctrine of

the sanctuary is not something that should be ignored or considered a fossilized result of the eighteenth-century approach to apocalyptic prophecies having little or no relevance for us today.

The prophecy is disturbing to some modern readers because the prophet had the imprudence, the audacity, or, perhaps better, the naivety to predict an event that was to take place 2,300 years later (457 BC-1844 AD). One can easily understand how this could be a stumbling block for many in the contemporary world. The historical contribution of the doctrine of the sanctuary is directly connected to the self-identity of the Adventist movement, its message, and its mission, and has been reaffirmed on exegetical and theological grounds.¹

Theological Content

From a theological perspective the biblical doctrine of the sanctuary addresses, among other theological themes, a fundamental biblical and existential concern that has disturbed humans for centuries, namely the phenomenon of the nearness of God. It has disturbed humans because what we seem to experience is not so much His nearness but His distance or absence. The social world in which we live is characterized by conflicts, prejudices, loneliness, and individualism. The message of the sanctuary reaches us in a world in which personal interrelatedness and nearness are agonizing. It reassures us that, even in the midst of chaos, God is very near us.

The topic of the presence and nearness of God is located at the core of the biblical theology of the sanctuary and engulfs biblical theology from beginning to end. It could easily function as a unifying and integrating theological theme.² It flows from creation through soteriology and eschatology to the consummation of salvation in re-creation.

Creation and the nearness of God

Creation is God's first work "outside" the circle of inter-Trinitarian relationships. This new divine task refers to a work that takes place in the realm of nothingness out of which God, in an effortless way, brought into existence the universe and the diversity of elements that compose it. The spoken word mediated the act of creation (Ps. 33:6).

Since creation takes place outside God, there is, by nature, a distance between God and His creation. This idea is emphasized in the Bible through the concept of the incomparability of God. Isaiah quoted the Lord saying, "To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? . . . Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" (Isa. 46:5, 9, NIV; cf. 45:5, 6).

Since everything there is belongs to the category of the created, there is nothing and no one within the universe who is like the Creator. He is indeed unique. The distance between Him and His creation is radically affirmed when it is categorically stated that the "heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you" (1 Kings 8:27, NIV).

That is to say, creation cannot circumscribe God because He is by nature the transcendent Creator whose mode of existence is fundamentally, even essentially, different from that of His creatures. The universe and creation are not God's natural dwelling. This raises the important question of the nature of God's presence within His creation.

The doctrine of the sanctuary reveals that our transcendent God chose to be near His creatures, to dwell among them. This simple theological insight rules out the philosophical option of deism that argues for a distant God who abandoned His creation and left it to be governed by impersonal laws. It also rejects pantheism that depicts God's presence within

creation not as nearness but as embedded in creation to the extent that the divine impersonal essence permeates everything there is.

The biblical God is a personal God who, in an act of condescension, localized Himself within His creation to have fellowship with His self-conscious intelligent creatures. The psalmist assures us that the "LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne" (11:4, NIV). The Incomparable One "established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19, NIV). That throne "was established long ago"(93:2, NIV).

God's localized presence within the space of His creatures is a unique fragment of space in the universe. It is a space within which God makes Himself accessible to His creatures; it assures intelligent life throughout the cosmos that God is indeed near. But His localized presence does not limit or restrict Him to a particular place.

It is precisely because He is dwelling at a particular locale within creation that His presence is felt throughout the totality of the universe. He said to the Israelites, "'Am I only a God nearby,' declares the LORD, 'and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?'" (Jen 23:23, 24, NIV).

Nothing, absolutely nothing, takes place in the universe outside God's presence. The personal God who dwells in the heavenly temple at the same time rules from there over the totality of the space inhabited by His creatures (Ps. 139:7-16).

This unique and sublime fragment of space is the administrative center of the universe from which the Lord "rules over all" (103:19, NIV). It is the central place for heavenly creatures to worship the Lord and be instructed by Him (103:19-22). It is also there that the heavenly council meets with the Lord (89:5, 6; cf. Job 1:6). It is fundamentally a sacred space of meeting or encounter between God and His creation, a reference point that orients all other spaces.

The heavenly family knows where God has localized Himself, where His immediate presence can be experienced. The nearness of God is real and visible in the heavenly temple. It was God's love that moved Him to be close and very near to those He loved. That nearness was also indispensable because creation is by nature finite; it cannot sustain itself. God's nearness was the means through which His sustaining power preserved creation from self-extinction.

At the same time, His nearness satisfied the built-in need of His creatures to have fellowship with their Creator. The fragment of space in which God localized Himself—the heavenly sanctuary—provided for a divine nearness that was indispensable to the well-being of the universe, and in particular for that of His self-conscious intelligent creatures.

Sin and the nearness of God

Sin is the attempt of God's creatures to distance themselves from their Creator by claiming autonomy and self-determinacy (Isa. 29:13). This attitude of rebellion is a rejection of God's nearness that is later perceived by humans as the absence of God. God's plan of salvation is God's way of bridging the distance between Him and sinful creatures in order for Him to be close to them.

The rebellion of humans, manifested in their willingness to join forces with God's enemy in the cosmic conflict, moved the planet itself from nearness to God. It removed or distanced earth and all that was upon it from God.

By asking the Israelites to build Him a sanctuary, God was showing them that in spite of sin He was still near to them; that even though they did not have access to the heavenly dwelling, He was willing to localize Himself within a world of sin to reveal His gracious disposition to be close to them. Consequently God selected a particular fragment of space within the space of sin

and uncleanness and sanctified it. He re-created a fragment of the original creation free from the miasma of sin and evil, and occupied it—came to dwell in it. That earthly dwelling was an illustration of the way the heavenly kingdom of God operates and of the way God was going to restore the nearness of His presence to a fallen race. Thus sin had not been able fully to separate God from sinners. He still was a near God.

The amazing dimension of God's plan was not that He was willing to live in an earthly temple, within a world of rebellion, in order to provide for humans access to His heavenly temple. The incomprehensible aspect of God's anguish for nearness to us is that He localized the fullness of His presence in a human being, Jesus (Col. 1:19). This is optimal accessibility and nearness!

It may be difficult for some to acknowledge that God dwells in a real heavenly temple, but it is much more difficult to imagine Him fully localized in the person of a human being, namely in Jesus. In Him the divine and the human were bonded together revealing an unbreakable nearness of God to humans. Access to God's glorious nearness in His heavenly temple was now possible exclusively through Jesus (John 14:1-3; Rom. 8:34-39; Heb. 7:25). The parabolic nature and function of the earthly sanctuary came to an end when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14, NIV).

Restoring the divine nearness

How was the divine nearness restored to rebellious human beings? The distance created by sin was real and would have been permanent had it not been for Christ's reconciling act of salvation. Since the Fall God illustrated for us through the sacrificial system how He would bring humans back to nearness to Him. The sacrificial victims bore the sin of the repentant sinners, experiencing the ultimate distance from God through death, while the sinner experienced the nearness of God through forgiveness. God in His sanctuary was, through His forgiving grace, assuming responsibility for the sins of repentant humans, finding a way of allowing them to remain in His presence (Exod. 34:5-7).

The typological significance of the sacrificial system found its fulfillment in the death of Christ. He bore our sins on the cross, thus experiencing the absolute distance from God that we all deserve. Christ's agonizing question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 7:46, NIV), raised in a unique way God's need for nearness.

The cost of our redemption was paid by God Himself when the Godhead experienced separation, the voluntary pulling apart of One of the members of the Trinity. There was unity, but unity in suffering and distance. Thus God's nearness to us was possible, because God was in Christ experiencing our eternal distance from Him.

Humanity brought near

The atoning power of the Cross made it possible for us to have access to the presence of God in His heavenly dwelling. God's nearness to the totality of the cosmos has been restored to the human race through Christ. He ascended to the Father and sat down at His right hand (Heb. 8:1, 2). This is the closest anyone could be to God.

Equally important is the fact that no other person can bring us closer to the Father than Jesus because He is the Son of God (5:5). As Son He is constantly in His immediate presence, and since He is our Mediator we participate in that same privilege through Him. Without Christ's nearness to God as Mediator in the heavenly temple the fullness of the benefits of the Cross will be inaccessible to us. It is through Him that the atoning power of the Cross continues to be

effective in our lives and in the lives of those who are constantly surrendering themselves to Jesus (1 John 1:9; 2:1, 2).

Through His work in the heavenly temple, the nearness of God continues to sustain the universe (Col. 1:17), to preserve it in spite of the presence of evil, and provides for us access to the very throne of God (Heb. 4:15, 16). Through it we experience the nearness of God in moments of existential turmoil (Heb. 4:16; Ps. 34:19).

Eschatology and the consummation of God's nearness

Christ's mediation in the heavenly sanctuary plays a central role in bringing the cosmic conflict to an end by transforming the Christian hope into a glorious reality. His work of reconciliation was typified through the daily ministry of the Old Testament priesthood and His work of judgment through the services of the Day of Atonement.

The apocalyptic book of Daniel announced a human attempt to usurp the mediation of Christ and with it the free access and nearness to God that Christ obtained for us (8:9-12). This happened through the institution of a false system of mediation within the church itself. The same prophecy pointed to the time when such usurpation was to be unmasked through the proclamation of Christ's high-priestly ministry as the only and exclusive way of access to God in His heavenly dwelling (8:13, 14).

Daniel uses the typology of the Day of Atonement to describe the consummation of God's redemptive work in Christ. The heavenly temple is the place where God has been dealing with the sin problem through the mediation of Christ, but this work of mediation will come to an end through the eschatological cosmic cleansing from sin and rebellious sinners. Then the nearness of God to His creatures will manifest itself through the eschatological judgment.

In Daniel 7 God's nearness is associated with a work of judgment that takes place before His angelic host (7:9, 10, 22). In the Bible God can come near His people and His enemies in judgment and the result is vindication and safety for His people and defeat and shame for His enemies (Hos. 9:7; Isa. 51:5; Ps. 69:19).

The imagery used throughout a large section of Daniel 7 is military. Yet, the defeat of the fourth beast and its "little horn" takes place in the court of law. That is to say, their final destruction has a legal foundation; it is not an arbitrary decision motivated by divine irrational rage. The nearness of God in judgment results in victory for God's people and the extermination of the evil power that upset the cosmic order and the original nearness established by God with His children in the beginning. The kingdom, handed over by God to the Son of Man, belongs now to Him and to His people.

The nearness of God in final judgment

God's nearness in judgment is possibly one of the most important images used in the Bible to describe the consummation of God's redemptive work. In the resolution of the sin problem, one of the most important aspects is not its extermination but the recognition by all the parties involved that the extermination is indispensable and justifiable. Everyone is to be fully and absolutely persuaded that this is the right decision in the cosmic struggle. The destruction of evil is not just God's decision but the decision of each creature including those who will be deleted from the universe. This will be accomplished through the pre-Advent (Dan. 7:9, 10, 26, 27; Rom. 2:5), the millennial (Rev. 20:4), and the post-millennial judgment (20:11-15), that is to say, the final judgment.

In the visions of Daniel, judgment, cleansing, and deliverance are inseparable. This cluster of ideas is found in Daniel's second dream (Dan. 8). He addresses the topic of salvation using a term in which legal, cultic, and soteriological ideas interact—the Hebrew verb *tsadaq*, "be right, be just" (cf. Isa. 53:11).

Through the ideology of the Day of Atonement, Daniel is informed that the original cosmic order or nearness will be restored through judgment, vindication, and cleansing. The military images are left behind and a new image is used to define that from which the universe needs to be delivered: uncleanness, separation from God.

This brings the issue of salvation home to a personal level, because it insinuates that we are unclean and have therefore become distanced from God. The threat to God's people is no longer an external attack from enemy forces but an internal condition that threatens the enjoyment of the nearness of God.

The consummation of the cleansing of God's people and of the universe through the final judgment will result in the restoration of cosmic harmony; God's permanent nearness and accessibility to His creatures. Daniel's dream in chapter 8 is pointing to that glorious event which happens to be, under God's providence, the very goal of the plan of redemption and of human history.

Christian eschatology has always anticipated the beatific vision of God, the permanent enjoyment of God's immediate presence by the redeemed ones (Matt. 5:8). At that moment, God's nearness will be experienced in a new, personal way, merging visibility with permanent accessibility. The Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary proclaims and joyfully anticipates that moment (Rev. 21:3, 4).

1 The best source of information is found in the series titled Daniel and Revelation Committee series (Frank B. Holbrook, ed.), which includes the titles *Symposium on Daniel* (Washington, D.C., BRI, 1986); idem., *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy* (Washington, D.C.; BRI, 1986); idem., *Issues in the Book of Hebrews* (Washington, D.C.: BRI, 1989); Arnold V. Wallenkampf and Richard Leshner, eds., *The Sanctuary and the Atonement* (Silver Spring, Md.: BRI, 1989); and the articles on "Divine Judgment" and the "Sanctuary" in Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000).

2 The theological topic of God's presence has been suggested as an integrating theological theme in biblical theology; see for instance, Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper and Row, 1978), 475, 476.