October, 1994

The Sanctuary and Adventist Experience

P. Gerard Damsteegt, Andrews University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/p_gerard_damsteegt/35/
The sanctuary and Adventist experience

P. Gerard Damsteegt

Looking at a vital pillar of faith

What is the foundation of your faith? If asked that question, a Seventh-day Adventist today might respond, “Jesus Christ, of course!” or “The Bible,” or even “Our special lifestyle.” But our earliest pioneers would no doubt declare, “The sanctuary and the 2300 days!”

Thus, Ellen G. White said in 1906, “The correct understanding of the ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith.”1 Years before she had called the heavenly sanctuary “the very center of Christ’s work in behalf of men” and had warned that an understanding of Christ’s sanctuary ministry is so vital that those who fail to obtain it will be unable “to exercise the faith which is essential at this time, or to occupy the position which God designs them to fill.”2

Why is that so? And what is the “correct understanding” of the heavenly sanctuary?

Millerite Adventist understanding

Before the great disappointment of October 22, 1844, the Millerite Adventist understanding of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary included the belief, held by many other Christians, that Jesus our high priest began His antitypical day of atonement ministry in the Most Holy place upon His ascension to heaven. Unlike other Christians, they believed that He would complete His day of atonement ministry and leave the heavenly sanctuary at the end of the 2300 days, in or around 1844. And some of them, led by the Methodist expositor Josiah Litch, believed as early as 1841 that the judgment of Daniel 7 was commencing prior to the Second Coming. They called this judgment the “trial” and said it was separating the righteous from the wicked and determining who would be resurrected at the “execution” of the judgment at the Second Coming.3

Although the Millerite Adventists knew that Jesus was currently in the heavenly sanctuary, they did not understand that the heavenly sanctuary would be “cleansed” in fulfillment of Daniel 8:14. They interpreted the sanctuary of Daniel 8 as the church on earth and also as the earth itself, and said that both would be cleansed at the Second Coming. The cleansing of the church, according to William Miller and most of his followers, was a cleansing from all sin and apostasy. That the margin in Miller’s Bible offered “justified” as a synonym for “cleansed” confirmed Miller in his anticipation of this spiritual cleansing. As for the earth, it would be cleansed by fire.

Post-disappointment understanding

Failure of the October 22, 1844, expectation led to intensive reexamination of the Bible and with it the discovery of additional insights so pertinent that instead of being the end of Adventism, 1844 became viewed as a landmark in salvation history and a most prominent sign of the certainty and nearness of Christ’s second advent. Leaders in this early investigation were Hiram Edson, Joseph Bates, and James and Ellen White, who be-
came founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Others such as O.R.L. Crosier chose not to stay with the group that later became Seventh-day Adventists.

A real heavenly sanctuary
Helpful insights came in studying biblical typology, analyzing Christ’s New Testament priesthood as antitypical of two orders of Old Testament priesthood. Christ’s ordination under the Melchizedek priesthood authorized Him to function legally as a heavenly high priest (Heb. 7), while the Aaronic/Levitical priesthood revealed the pattern of His heavenly priesthood (Heb. 8-10).

From these typologies our pioneers discovered further that as the Old Testament Aaronic priests ministered within a sanctuary (a tabernacle or a temple), so Christ, the high priest of the new covenant, ministers in a true heavenly sanctuary, one that “God pitched and not man,” the sanctuary of which the Levitical sanctuary on earth was a copy (see Ex. 25:8, 9, 40; Heb. 8:2, 5; 9:24).

To their surprise they saw that, contrary to their previous notions and to general Christian opinion, the Book of Hebrews does not teach that Christ entered the Most Holy Place at the time of His ascension. Hebrews says literally that when Christ went to heaven He entered the “holy places,” meaning simply “the heavenly sanctuary.” The Greek text of Hebrews clearly gives the plural, “holy places,” fully supporting the presence of a two-apartment sanctuary in heaven. Thus, the New Testament was seen to affirm that like the earthly sanctuary, which had a holy place and a Most Holy Place, so the heavenly sanctuary also has two apartments.4

The pioneers concluded, in harmony with biblical typology, that as the first phase of the earthly priestly ministry—the daily—transpired in the holy place, so the first phase of Christ’s heavenly ministry was performed in the holy place of the heavenly sanctuary, not in the Most Holy Place as they had formerly believed. They also discovered that just as the second phase of the Old Testament sanctuary services—the yearly, or Day of Atonement—took place in the earthly most holy place, so the antitype of this service would be fulfilled by Christ’s cleansing of the sanctuary in heaven’s Most Holy Place just before the Second Advent. This involved the astonishing discovery that the heavenly sanctuary itself would need cleansing—a truth plainly taught in Hebrews 9:23. This cleansing would not be by the blood of animals, like the earthly sanctuary, or by fire, like the earth, but by the blood of Christ Himself.

These new insights, derived from Exodus, Leviticus, Daniel, Malachi, and Hebrews, led the Adventist pioneers to the conclusion that the end of the 2300 years in 1844 was not the second coming of their Saviour, but the beginning of the most significant new era in the plan of salvation: the entering of Christ into His second and final phase of high priestly ministry, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary on the antitypical Day of Atonement. At this time Christ “came to the Ancient of days” (Dan. 7:13) to commence a judgment, investigative in nature—the first phase of the final judgment.

Cleansing the sanctuary on two levels
As noted, the Millerite Adventists saw the Daniel 8:14 cleansing of the sanctuary as meeting fulfillment on two levels: cleansing the church from sin, and cleansing the earth by fire. After 1844, faithful Adventists continued to maintain the concept of a dual cleansing, but now it no longer included the cleansing of the earth.

Instead, the cleansing pertained to the heavenly sanctuary and the church. This new understanding was fully in harmony with the Day of Atonement services, when the people were required to “afflict themselves,” to engage in soul-searching, or be judged and cut off (see Lev. 16:23). The realization that Christ has begun His final ministry on the antitypical Day of Atonement had a profound impact on the believers.

In the Day-Star for April 18, 1846, two months after the famous sanctuary article appeared in the Day-Star Extra of February 7, O.L.R. Crosier referred to a perfect harmony between activities currently going on in heaven and on earth. “There is,” he wrote, “a literal and a spiritual temple—the literal being the sanctuary in New Jerusalem (literal city), and the spiritual the church—the literal occupied by Jesus Christ, our King and Priest (John 14:2, Heb. 8:2; 9:11); the spiritual by the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. 3:17; 6:19, Eph. 2:20-22). Between these two there is a perfect concert of action, as Christ prepares the place the Spirit does the people. When He came to this temple, the sanctuary, to cleanse it, the Spirit commenced the special cleansing of the people (Mal. 3:1-3).”

This special work of personal purification was to prepare the believer to pass successfully the investigative judgment before the Second Advent. This insight was fully endorsed by the Sabbatarian Adventist pioneers like Joseph Bates, James and Ellen White, J. N. Andrews, Hiram Edson, and Uriah Smith.

The need for a purification of God’s people received strong endorsement from the understanding of the second angel’s message that Adventists had developed in 1843, when they began to experience persecution. The message forcefully announced the fall of Babylon, implying that God’s true people must separate themselves from its apostate influence.

Reforms in beliefs and behavior
The quest for Bible-based doctrines led Seventh-day Adventist pioneers...
to adopt several reforms in belief and practice in contrast to the established churches. These reforms included, most notably, worship on the seventh-day Sabbath instead of Sunday. Attention to Christ’s Day of Atonement ministry led to an awareness of Revelation 11:19: “The temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of his covenant was seen” (NKJV), and this in turn directed their attention to the Sabbath commandment. They saw Jesus now in the Most Holy Place, spotlighting the Sabbath as being still the sign of God’s everlasting covenant. The new light on the sanctuary suddenly made Sabbath reform relevant! This quest for Bible-based doctrines led to other reforms, such as (1) baptism by immersion; (2) tithes and offerings; (3) living healthfully to prepare believers physically, mentally, and spiritually for the Second Advent (1 Thess. 5:23); (4) following a Christlike lifestyle characterized by simplicity, without jewelry and cosmetics (1 Peter 3:3, 4); (5) believing that only through the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12) can believers be fully partakers of His righteousness, receiving forgiveness of sins, power to live a victorious life, and the full assurance of salvation.

The significance of the sanctuary
These Bible-based discoveries transformed a seemingly defeated group of enthusiasts into an irresistible army of evangelists propelled by a most glorious mission mandate: the proclamation of the last message of mercy that was to enlighten the whole world with the light of Christ in preparation for the Second Advent (see Rev. 18:1).

Key to the disappointment. “The subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God’s hand had directed the great advent movement and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people. . . . Light from the sanctuary illumined the past, the present, and the future.”

Foundation of our faith. “The correct understanding of the ministration in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith.”

Essential to true faith. “The subject of the sanctuary and the investigative judgment should be clearly understood by the people of God. All need a knowledge for themselves of the position and work of their great High Priest. Otherwise it will be impossible for them to exercise the faith which is essential at this time or to occupy the position which God designs them to fill. . . . The sanctuary in heaven is the very center of Christ’s work in behalf of men.”

Endorsed by the Holy Spirit. “As the great pillars of our faith have been presented, the Holy Spirit has borne witness to them, and especially is this urable, self-sacrificial love and of His ongoing grace and power to help us sacrifice ourselves in the service of others. How are we to explain this neglect?

There also was a decline from the historic stand of the pioneers to make the Bible the norm of both faith and practice. Members were inclined to follow church leaders rather than shape their convictions by personal Bible study.

Additionally, church leaders of the 1880s generally failed to understand the practical implications of Christ’s death and His day of atonement ministry. Sensing only slightly the need for “afflicting their souls,” and seeking the experiential “blotting out of sin,” believers did not experience as they should the impartation of His righteousness.

Beyond that, attempts to correct the condition of the church met strong opposition. The majority of the leaders did not welcome and in fact disregarded the testimony of Jesus through the ministry of Ellen White.

Neglecting the earthly dimension of the antitypical day of atonement profoundly affected the spiritual condition of the church, the lifestyle of believers, and the impact of their witness on nonmembers. Emphasis on Christless doctrines led to the publication of doctrinal differences, fueling a climate of disunity and party spirit. Distrust and envy pervaded the church and was manifested in loveless and inhuman behavior, character assassination, and abundant gossip.

Instead of following God’s counsels to complete the mission He had assigned to the remnant, leadership adopted human strategies that coupled with Christless emphasis on the law, created an unfavorable impression of legalism on nonmembers.

Neglecting the heavenly dimension
During the early 1900s Dr. J. H. Kellogg’s pantheism “spiritualized” away the existence of a real heavenly sanctuary. His view that God’s presence permeates everything made Christ’s ministry in a particular place
irrelevant. Social involvement in medical and humanitarian work of a nondenominational nature replaced the practice of spiritual self-examination, the affliction of soul to meet the coming Lord. It also preempted the need to proclaim the distinctive prophetic truths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The theological consequences of this spiritualizing of the sanctuary doctrine led to denial of both Christ’s investigative judgment work and of His special work of cleansing His people. Inevitably came the conclusion that nothing at all happened in 1844.

With these denials came a muting of the sense of urgency. Prophetic preaching declined, and indifference marked our attitude toward our unique landmark doctrines. Present truth was redefined in terms of preoccupation with the social and humanitarian dimensions of the gospel at the expense of living in anticipation of Christ’s soon return.

Ellen White called Kellogg’s spiritualization of heavenly realities the “alpha” of apostasy and warned that an even worse “omega” was soon to follow.

Current distortions

A majority of Seventh-day Adventists continue to base their understanding of the sanctuary on the Bible. They have concluded that the pioneer discoveries of the present truth have shed great light on Christ’s intercessory ministry in their behalf.

In some parts of the world, however, we see a continuation of the earlier “spiritualizing” trend. A flood of new Bible translations aids this process, for most new translations do not use “cleansed” in Daniel 8:14, but prefer “restored to its rightful state” or “emerge victorious,” and so on. Because these terms do not readily call to mind Day of Atonement imagery, some people have downplayed or given up the idea that the passage refers to the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. However, such is the richness of the Hebrew verb in Daniel 8:14, that it is possible to see the intimate association of the cleansing of the sanctuary with the restoration of the sanctuary truth and the victorious rise of God’s remnant people.

Saddest of all, perhaps, the spiritualization of the sanctuary deprives people of harmoniously cooperating on earth in the final work our Saviour is currently performing during the “hour of God’s judgment.” Often sanctuary discussions become arguments when they should unite us like no other doctrine.

Downsizing the sanctuary doctrine. Other contemporary attempts to interpret the sanctuary can be characterized as downsizing the doctrine. Recently, for example, one minister remarked that if you can make sense out of the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief statement on the sanctuary doctrine, congratulations. To him the sanctuary has little practical relevance. Its investigative judgment aspect, he says, has been a stumbling block for many young Seventh-day Adventists, undermining the gospel and promoting perfectionism, legalism, guilt, and in relation to the time of trouble, a religion of fear and arrogance. Our presentation of Christ’s sanctuary ministry, this minister insists, should be limited to His role as Intercessor, a role that involves participation in human suffering, taking on Himself our diseases (including AIDS). As Christ suffered with sufferers and intercedes for them, so Seventh-day Adventists should also alleviate human suffering.

In response, we can certainly agree on the importance of Christ’s work as Intercessor. Adventists, indeed, have already incorporated its various dimensions into the fundamental beliefs dealing with Christ’s role, work, and ministry (see numbers 2, 9, and 10). Christ’s identification with suffering humanity may not have been stressed everywhere as it should have been, but this does not mean that we should downplay the progressive understanding of the heavenly sanctuary discovered through Bible study in the years following 1844.

The insights gained in 1844 constitute a part of present truth that continues to be relevant, seeing it calls the attention of the world to the arrival of the judgment hour and to the urgent need to participate with Christ in overcoming every sin. Regressing to the pre-1844 sanctuary view that confined Christ’s ministry to only that of Intercessor is a serious neglect of present truth. It is a distortion of the gospel proclamation foreseen for our time in the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12. And it provides a false gospel of false assurance in that it fails to tell people what will happen if they reject Christ’s final offer of overcoming grace.

Negative feelings toward the sanctuary doctrine are not solved by downsizing it. Now, as never before, there is a need for a deep study of the Scriptures. Our pioneers arrived at their insights through thorough Bible study, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Seventh-day Adventists today need deep Bible study, observing correct principles of Bible interpretation and guided by the Spirit.

It is true that this doctrine has been misused, but is that a reason to discard it? Because some people overeat the healthiest food and develop serious diseases, shall we discard healthy foods? Because some people keep the Sabbath legalistically, shall we give up all Sabbath observance? Misuse of the sanctuary doctrine does not justify stripping it of its splendid progressive light.

In my own life it has brought joy knowing that daily my Saviour intercedes for me, my family, my church, and the world. It has also brought urgency, knowing that the final judgment is now in progress and that God is eager for me to “afflict my soul” and overcome all sin. In response to His law as well as to His ongoing grace, I give myself daily in total dedication to sharing the good news of the cleansing of the sanctuary. Its proper and balanced understanding brings no fear, but abiding assurance and strength. I believe that as I cooperate with His power and grace in overcoming sin, my destiny is secure. The work of my High Priest and Judge in the sanctuary has strengthened my confidence in Him as has nothing else.

“Pre-Advent” instead of “investi-
realized. The practical results of a faith of Jesus as a result of total surrender that Christlike life can be realized. The practical results of a healthy view of the sanctuary doctrine for the church today bring the full participation of believers into the final compassionate outreach that will enlighten the whole world and usher in the coming of the Lord.

The greatest threat. The greatest danger to the sanctuary doctrine is indifference resulting from failure to see its relevance and practicality. The first step toward reaching a balanced interpretation of the sanctuary doctrine is to study the whole scriptural counsel, studying every relevant passage in its context. The true interpretation will be centered on Christ. Every sanctuary-related passage should be studied from the viewpoint of what it teaches about the preciousness of Jesus and what He has done and is doing for us. Otherwise, the doctrine will not be able to exert its proper inspiring and transforming influence, rendering it "irrelevant."

The true interpretation will retain the two-dimensional, or two-level, understanding of Christ's day of atonement ministry on earth today as well as in heaven. It will see His work as associated intimately with grace, forgiveness, and the blotting out of sins in the heavenly sanctuary. Proper emphasis on this ministration of the Lamb's blood in heaven will lead sinners to repentance. God provides the abundant grace to lead sinners to repentance and believers to a daily deepening work of repentance and commitment. Thus the believer experiences both justification and sanctification.

This process involves (1) belief in Jesus and His saving work as our personal intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary, and (2) reconciliation to God, which means entering into a dynamic covenant relationship with Christ our high priest. It means a work of confession, repentance, consecration, and restitution. Those who are truly reconciled to God will respond by making things right with those they have offended and by loving their enemies.

Restoring the sanctuary truth

Proclamation of the sanctuary truth fully restores the biblical harmony between God's plan of salvation as portrayed in both the Old and New Testaments, a harmony that fell into disregard as a result of the apostasy of the "man of lawlessness." As such, the role of the remnant, brought into existence in 1844 to make this proclamation, becomes significant.

A balanced understanding of the sanctuary doctrine involves cooperation with Christ's mission to the world. Failure of believers to be service-oriented results mainly from viewing the doctrine incorrectly and neglecting its import in daily experience. What is needed, therefore, is not a downsizing of the doctrine, but a fuller and more balanced view of Christ and His sanctuary ministry through a deep study of the Word, under the guidance of the Spirit. This will lead to following the Lamb wherever He leads.

The essence of the sanctuary doctrine is its unique revelation of Christ's ministry of reconciliation for and in us, enabling us to experience His love, which we can share with others in unselfish and sacrificial service so they see a genuine revelation of Jesus as the only hope for humanity. It embraces our mental, spiritual, and physical attributes, and is designed to transform sinners into victorious people who are patiently yet actively awaiting the coming of their Saviour. "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12, NKJV).