

THE USE OF DRAMA IN THE CHURCH

THE NEW AND OLD TESTAMENT ARE FULL OF SYMBOLIC DRAMATIZATIONS

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Specialists in the communication field have confirmed that 83% of what we learn from the external world comes through vision; 11% through listening, and 6% are spread among the tact, smell and taste. That means we remember way more what we see than what we just hear.

If vision is the most efficient process of communication, should the Seventh Day Adventist Church use only the listening resources in the proclamation of the “eternal gospel”? (Rev. 14:16). To what extent can this denomination incorporate visual resources and dramatization into its religious services, without going against the principles shown in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen White?

To Answer those question, we should consider primarily some usage of those dramatizations in Biblical literature and in the writings of Ellen White. Then, we would look then on how identify some basic principles which can help us establish safeguards on the subject.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The liturgy of the Old Testament is centered in symbolic rituals, first it was the patriarchal altars, after that it was the mosaic tabernacle: lastly the temple in Jerusalem. Those services ministered by the priests (Ex. 28-29; Lev. 8) were a dramatic prefigure of the salvation, which should be come to life in the ministry and service of Jesus Christ. Animals representing Christ, the sacrifice of those animals as a symbolic act of the death of Christ: the blood of those animals prefiguring the blood of Christ. Also Israel celebrations were marked by uncountable dramatizations (see Ex. 12:1-27, Lev. 16 and 23). Ellen White says that all that system of the sanctuary were the “The gospel in images”. (1)

Another aspect of the dramatic religion of the Old Testament was the ceremony of circumcision. That act was ordered by God as an external symbol of his alliance between His people and God himself. On Numbers 21:4-9. God commanded Moses to lift a bronze serpent as a symbol of Christ. Everyone who looked at that serpent would live.

There were also dramatizations in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. God himself used pictorial resources to unfold religious, social and political situations, in prophetic visions registered on those books, as in Ezekiel, Daniel and Zachariah. For example, the second chapter of Daniel, the Second Coming of Christ is pictured in the big stone which hit the feet of the statue. Now, on the first chapter of Hosea, we find God commanding the prophet (Hosea) to dramatize the apostasy of Israel by marrying a prostitute.

Therefore, the usage of the visual resources (including dramatizations), were always present in the worship of the Old Testament. Such resources were part of the service in the sanctuary, the ceremony of circumcision, and the prophetic messages. However, the use of such resources is not limited to the Old Testament.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

All the four Gospels show the uncountable times when Christ used vivid illustrations of Nature and daily living to teach spiritual lessons. He didn't only use didactic teachings of the parables, but compared himself to such figures, as the water (John 4:10), the bread (John 6:41 and 48), the light (8:12), the door (10:9), the pastor (10:14) and the vine (15:1-5).

Even the ceremony of baptism is a symbolic dramatization, institute by Christ to define the beginning of a life of dedication to God. Christ doesn't only go under such ceremony (Mat. 3:13-17), but commanded that such should be performed to everybody who accepts the gospel.

Even His dramatic death on the cross had those pedagogical principles. Ellen White declares that "the cross is a revelation to our blunted senses, of the pain sin has caused to God's heart" (2). She adds that "Calvary is a monument of the excellent sacrifice demanded to atone the transgression of the divine law." (3)

This dramatic event had place upon the cross to touch "our blunted senses" (4). It is remembered in the ritual of communion (see Mat. 26:17:30; John 13:1-20), which is a liturgy ordained by Christ to be periodically performed by His followers (John 13:13-17; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). In the similitude of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the contents of Revelation of John is characterized by symbolic dramatizations, which reveals, in pictures, the unfold of the plan of salvation, given by Christ himself as part of His church liturgy.

THE WRITING OF ELLEN WHITE (5)

Analyzing the writings of Ellen White, you realize that by one hand she:

1. Approves many times the dramatic liturgies of the New Testament (the ceremony of the sanctuary, etc.)
2. Uplifts the liturgics dramatizations of the New Testament (the baptism, the foot washing, communion)
3. Magnifies Christ's sacerdotal ritual in heaven.
4. Didn't criticize the dramatization that she watched in the Sabbath School of Battle Creek in 1886 (6)
5. Didn't condemn the Nativity scene in 1888 in Battle Creek, just pointed out her approve of the positive points and reprove the negative sides. (7)
6. Didn't condemn the use of pictures of the beasts in Revelation as evangelistic illustrations.

On the other hand, several passages disapprove the use of any theatrical exhibitions. (8). Were those passages condemning indistinctly every kind of dramatization? I don't believe so, because if that were the case, we had to stop the ministry of baptism or communion from our churches.

It is interesting to realize that the same passages of Ellen White which disapprove the use of any kind of theatrical exhibitionism, show what the negative aspects were that made her disapprove of such exhibitions. Among those characteristic we can see: (1) separation from God; (2) take away eternal interests; (3) feed pride; (4) excites passion; (5) glorifies addictions; (6) excites the sensual thoughts: (7) deprave the imagination. (9)

Therefore, we can conclude that dramatizations are accepted when: (1) promote closeness to God; (2) get the attention to heavenly themes; (3) do not feed pride; (4) do not excite passion; (5) disapprove addictions; (6) do not excite sensual thoughts; (7) uplift imagination.

THE SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

Frequently groups of theater have participated on several programs of TV maintained by the Seventh Day Adventist Church around the world. Special casts for dramatization were needed for the production of movies and videos: "One in Twenty Thousand" (EUA), "The Great Controversy" (Argentina), "Keepers of the Flame" (Australia), "The Blue Boat" (Brazil), and many others. Adventists evangelists have used many of the films in their public conferences.

Dramatizations are part of life in most of the boarding schools kept by the institution. Those are also used at the local churches level, for the Mother's Day, Nativity scene, and in the children's departments.

Several of those presentations have spiritually elevated those who presented them, as much as those who watched. However, there are those who think that the ends justifies the means, and that only good intentions are the criteria to accept the presentation of a program. But, if we restrict the criteria under the "good intentions" level, we could go under the terrible mistake of opening the door to any program culturally acceptable.

BASIC CRITERIA

It is necessary to give careful attention, not only to the intentions, but to the nature of the program, to the choosing of the participants, as much as the place for the rehearsals and the place for the presentation.

The dramatizations have to: (1) Avoid the vulgar or comic; (2) Avoid the use of fantasy elements (animals and trees that talk, etc.). (3) Be biblical and historically correct to how it happened; and above all, (4) Exalt God and His word (Not the presenters of the program)

The presenters should be people whose lives and behaviors are in conformity to the SDA principles, and are willing to abide by the orientation of local and superiors of the denomination. It would be wise that all the participants on the cast to be elected by the guidance of the church manual of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, on the section "members of the church choir".

The leaders of the church should be responsible to give precise orientations to the presenters of dramatizations. Those leaders should exercise a balanced judgment, so the presentations are a way (not an end) of better glorify God, and more effectively communicate the gospel to the world. It should never allow dramatizations to abandon the preaching of God's word in the Adventist liturgy.

That is why the dramatizations are present in the liturgy of the Old and the New Testament. Ellen White, in her way, doesn't condemn all kind of dramatization, but the theatrical dramatizations that take God away from attention, or the heavenly themes, feed pride, excite passion, glorify addictions, excite the sensual thoughts, and deprave the imagination.

If we decide that any dramatization is wrong, we would have to stop; (1) the use of films that are the product of dramatizations; (2) the most part of the program of the children's departments; (3) Any Christmas musical programs, and most of all music presentations of our church; and even (4) the celebration of baptism and communion.

On the other hand, we should be careful about the evaluation of the program and the nature of such, as in the selection of the participants, and the place and time for rehearsals and presentation. The correct usage of dramatization implies not that we only use our own mind as a guide (even a good one), but based on biblical principles and the writings of Ellen White. Every scene should glorify God and its presenters.

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