

# Stop The Music

by Richard O'Fill

If it can be said that religion is a personal thing, it cannot be said that corporate worship is a personal thing. Corporate worship is just that. Something that we do together. In recent years there has been a movement at every level of the church from the top down and from the bottom up to try to bring vitality to the worship that we do together. We are talking about what we usually do when we go to church on Sabbath morning. Not only has this movement been in our own denomination but it has pretty well spread over the Christian world. But particularly in North America, Australia and Western Europe.

This revolution in worship style was largely initiated by the segment that we call the charasmatics. I use the word revolution because it is an overthrowing of the existing forms of worship and replacing them with other forms. It would have been appropriate to have a reform of our worship in as much as a reform is not the same as a revolution, but as one young minister told me, "We are in charge now."

I have entitled this sermon. "Stop the Music". I am not saying that we should stop the music permanently, but only until we have sat down together and found answers to some questions which must be addressed. Remember, corporate worship is just that. It is something that we do together. It is unimaginable that we have come to the state of affairs in some places and in more and more places in which worship is something that is dividing us rather than uniting us. We should not be surprised. There is after all the old saying, "divide and conquer."

It seems to me that we should see what is happening and say, "Wait a minute, something is wrong here. Whatever we are doing must not be the right thing to do because what is going on is causing divisions and confusion in the very place where Jesus prayed that there would be unity."

I know that something is fundamentally wrong. When the young minister told me, "We are in charge now," his words illustrated that what is going on is a true revolution in every sense of the word. Friends, this must not be. The Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is the head of the church. An attitude that sees the church as being dominated by one race, culture, gender, or generation is not the church that Jesus established when He was here on earth. This is why I think there is a basic fallacy in the argument that worship is a cultural phenomena. If that were true, it would mean that you and I ought to be able to worship God any way that our particular culture is inclined to do.

If Christ is really the head of the church then it would seem to me that instead of debating among ourselves as to whether we should worship according to my culture or yours, we might do well to set down together and discover what are the Biblical principles of worship.

In Jeremiah 9 we read: "Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight."

In the context of what is presently going on in some places that text might say: "Thus saith the Lord, Let not the young people demand a change for change sake, let not the older people defend the status quo, let not anyone think that you can worship God any old way you please, but let the young and the old, let those from your culture and those from my culture, let all cultures sit down together and study to

understand and know me that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight."

I am increasingly convinced that as things seem to be going now, that we are not gathering together to worship God, rather we are increasingly gathering together to please ourselves. This is why we are insisting on doing it your way or my way. What this seems to be saying is that as far as God is concerned, anything goes.

The aspect of worship that is the focus of our problem is music. Of all the arts as we understand them the Bible tells us that music is the only one that will continue into heaven. Music began in heaven as a vehicle of praise to the Holy God and it will continue throughout eternity in the same role. The angels sing, the elect saints sing, and someday, we will hear the Lord Jesus Himself sing praise in the midst of the assembly. Heb. 2:12: "Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee."

In Rev. 15: 3-4 "And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God almighty; just and true are thy ways thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name: for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee, for thy judgments are made manifest." On the other hand the Bible tells us that one day the music of the world will cease. Rev. 18:22 says that the sound of the harpist, musicians, flutists and trumpeters, shall not be heard in you anymore.

Inasmuch as music was provided by God to his creation to be used to be something to praise and worship Him then it would seem to me that the music that we use to worship Him should be based on what we might call his culture not our own. Do you see what I mean? I cannot help but think that the problem that is manifesting itself in music these days is due to what I hope is a misunderstanding.

If worship is something that we are doing that is directed to us, to ours and to theirs, then surely we must give a little here and take a little there. But if music is about God, then it would seem to me that we must (as I mentioned earlier) sit down, put aside our differences, and discover together who God is. I don't need to tell you that our worship and therefore our music reveals who we think that God is. Unless we discover from the Scripture who God is, we could actually be worshipping another God or just, as they say, "whistling in the dark". In this case it would be the darkness of our own misunderstanding. God talks to us in Ps. 50:21. He says, "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee and set them in order before thine eyes."

Just because we are not being struck by lightening, or the ground is not opening to swallow us up we must not necessarily come to the conclusion that whatever we choose to offer the Lord in worship is pleasing to Him. He tells us not to see Him as one of the boys --" thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself". In Heb. 11:6 we read, "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."

A number of years ago I read that we can rise no higher than our concept of God. This is why it is imperative, not only for his glory but for our salvation, that we understand who has made us and how He expects to be worshiped. All of our worship, both in music and in the spoken word, must produce a high view of God. Our chief aim must be to glorify God and worship Him forever. Ps. 29:1,2, "Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness." Ps 96:9, " O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth."

Worship is not about us. It is about God. If worship is to be acceptable it must be consistent with who God is. Worship is not about us. It is about God. More and more we are hearing that worship is to meet our needs. Though it is true that we have a need to worship God, it is unthinkable that we can worship Him as we see fit. Even in God's redemptive plan for man salvation never begins with man and his need but with God and His glory. We seem to be trying to make worship attractive to more and more people. I have already said that this is not valid unless we are in fact not directing our worship to God but to each other. God is not pleased when just anyone pretends to worship him. It is even possible to worship God in vain. That means under certain circumstances that worship can even be a waste of time. In one place it says "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" Matt 15:7-9

The point is God cannot be worshiped and glorified where sin is accepted and entertained. This plainly means that a person who is living in known and open sin, a person who is resisting the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in their lives cannot worship inasmuch as the Scripture is clear that true worship must be from the heart. You may disagree with me 100% but this means that worship is not for everyone. Excuse me if I use a plain illustration, but just as physical intimacy between a man and a woman is only legitimate in the context of the marriage covenant, so worshiping a Holy God is only for those who have made a covenant to serve Him as their Maker and Lord.

Some have decided that they would craft the worship service for the unconverted, but in doing so they run the risk of profaning the name of our Holy God. In our worship we must obey God, rather than seek to please each other and especially the lost. Paul wrote in Gal 1:9 ff. "As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man."

You remember when Elijah challenged the children of Israel? He said, " If God be God worship Him, if Baal be god then worship him. We cannot serve both God and the world. These days some are trying to create an environment where the sinner feels as comfortable as the person who is committed to Jesus. When we do this we run the risk of three things. 1. Insulting the Holy One. 2. Misrepresenting God to the lost 3. Deeply grieving those who have made a commitment to Jesus and whose consciences are defiled by forms of worship that are closely patterned after the things of the world.

The unchurched or unbelieving person comes to us with ideologies that Scripture calls "darkness." Jesus makes it clear in John 3:19 that the world "loved darkness" (NIV). The biblical way to deal with darkness is to confront it lovingly with light. Creating a church environment that makes ideologies of darkness feel comfortable is to confront, as it were, darkness with darkness. There is a real danger that, in trying to reach the "lost," we find ourselves incorporating into the church concepts and perspectives incompatible with the truth and purity that the gospel represents.

We often hear that the church is a hospital for sinners, but it must be borne in mind that a hospital is where the sick go to get well. According to the metaphor, the church is a place where one goes as part of the getting-well process. Persons satisfied with themselves the way they are may not feel comfortable with the gospel call to repent (to change, to get well). Also, much is said these days about the church being an accepting place, but there is a real danger that the word "accepting" may be confused with "status quo." A person who loves "the world" and "the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15) may

not feel comfortable in the church. It is even likely that many of the unconverted's felt needs are diametrically opposed to what salvation is all about.

I am impressed that the Old Testament fundamentally teaches two basic concepts. One is that God is Holy. The word in Hebrew for Holy means separate. That means that He is not like us. This means that the more we try to make him like us the further away from the truth we find ourselves.

Another concept that is clear from the Old Testament is that the Holiness of God and the corruption of the world are incompatible. You will remember when God told Moses to take off his shoes because where God was the ground was holy. In the sanctuary service there were a host of ceremonies that had to do with purification. The point is clear. We are not to bring the profane into the presence of the Holy: to do so is to blaspheme our Holy God.

There were occasions in the Old Testament where when this was done the result was the death of those who did it. But because this did not happen every time and because it doesn't seem to be happening now we have come to believe that good and evil can co-exist and that light and darkness, truth and error can somehow be harmonized. This concept that truth and error, light and darkness can exist together has been institutionalized in the Asian concept of the "ying" and the "yang". You may have seen the symbol. It is a circle with black and white flowing together side by side inside.

We must not allow ourselves to deceive ourselves. God's Spirit will not always strive with men. There will come a day in which all that is profane will be purged away and only that which is holy will remain. The problem is that for the time being it seems that we can make an accommodation with evil. It seems that evil and good can co-exist. But when good and evil are mixed together it is the evil that washes out the good, or should I say that corrupts the good. Remember the Scripture tells us that a little yeast affects the whole lump of dough and so it is also in worship.

It seems more and more clear that in our enthusiasm to call the sinners out of the world, the effect seems more and more to be that we are bringing the world and evil into the church. This would not be the first time that this has happened and if you wonder what the result will be, find a good history book. In 1 Kings 12:28, 29 we discover that Jeroboam was only trying to make worship more relevant and accessible to the people when he set up the golden calves in Dan and Bethel. The consequence of this sin ultimately brought about the destruction of Israel as a nation. In the Christian Era Constantine took the lead in making Christian worship relevant to the people of the Roman Empire, Christians and non-Christians alike. Of course, he had to change the day of worship to do it.

This is why I insist that what we are doing is not making history but repeating it. I think if this is the course that we are bent on, we should sit down and study history to see if the results of the past are what we want for our present, and if they are not we must do a serious mid-course correction. I greatly fear that our change in worship styles is largely only a reflection of our change in lifestyles. In the past the call to the young people was to come out of the world and live a holy life. That call now seems to be, "Hey we don't care what you do, just come to church and we will do our best to make you feel comfortable."

Often I hear quoted as a justification for the new music and ways of playing it, that the scripture calls us to sing a new song and that the new music is just doing what the Bible is telling us to do. But what we are calling new songs in many places are simply trying to fit new words into old music. New and old in this respect are not about time. They are about lifestyles. God is surely not telling us to do new music as

compared to old music or that would mean that we couldn't put the Psalms to music. The Psalms are the oldest religious songs that there are.

When the Scripture calls on us to sing a new song, it is calling us to a new and different life. A new song is to be about a new life. Not a blending of the old and the new or a recycled old life but a life in which forgetting the things which are behind we are pressing forward toward the mark of the high-calling of God in Christ Jesus.

The Psalms call on us to sing unto him a new song. It is to be a song of a redeemed people of God. This new song is to be different and distinctive. It is to be a more glorious song, a purer, truer and more beautiful song than the world can ever sing. "Praise ye the Lord. Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints" Ps 149:1. In the book of Revelation it speaks of the saved: Rev 5:9,10."And they sung a new song, saying, thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue and people and nation." A new song, by the way is not just new words. When Scripture is calling on us to sing a new song in the first place it is calling on us to reject the world and to abandon it's sinful ways and then our song will not be just a song of new experience but it will be sung to a new melody and played in a different way that the way of the world.

Christian music must be just that--Christ-centered in its every aspect. Even the style and the melody must be to the glory of God. By the way, there are those who say that style and melody are neutral and all that matters are the words. This is simply not so. First, why do platinum-selling secular artists not believe that? Paul McCartney, originally of the Beatles and a solo artist since the 1970s, told the Washington Post: "The message is not in the lyrics, but in the music." Few people have had the kind of influence that McCartney has had on contemporary music, and if he is right, then music is hardly amoral. It's little wonder, then, that philosopher Allan Bloom, in his best-seller *The Closing of the American Mind*, wrote that rock is characterized by "antinomianism" (without law) and that "young people know that rock is the beat of sexual intercourse." To be fair, the kind of raucous music that McCartney and Bloom are describing isn't yet being advocated in most Adventist churches, but there are disturbing trends in that direction. Promoting the gospel message of our holy God through an unholy medium can only be called profanity.

Second, should music that reminds the listener and participator of the secular songs of the day be introduced into the church? It's time to put to rest the tired apocryphal story that Martin Luther used the "tavern tunes" of his day. Of the melodies in Luther's 37 chorales, 15 were composed by him, 13 came from Latin hymns, four were from German religious folk songs, two had originally been religious pilgrim songs, two were from unknown origin, and only one came directly from a secular folk song) This one song appeared in Luther's first hymnal in 1535, but was replaced by an original tune in his 1539 hymnal. Historians believe that Luther discarded the secular tune because people associated it with its previous lyrics). Luther's goal was to replace the world's music, not duplicate it. He used four-part harmony because he wanted to attract the worshiper away from secular songs.

If we are going to use music to honor God then the music must honor him in every way. We cannot justify taking styles and rhythms that are used create an atmosphere of sex, drug abuse, violence and the like and by changing the words think that we now have something that is to the glory of God. If we are to be honest we must admit that music without words is used to create atmosphere. I don't need to prove that to you. In the world of business and entertainment music is carefully chosen so that it will create just the atmosphere that is desired.

I greatly fear that when Christian artists take an old song of the world, dress it up, modify it and say it now represents the person of Jesus Christ, a Christian message or describes the character of God, they are assaulting the gospel and diminishing the gift that has been entrusted to them. This is inappropriate at best and sacrilegious at worst. We cannot pour new wine into old wineskins. Jesus himself said in Mark 2:22: "And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred, but new wine must be put into new bottles."

Friends, I think you can see that what is involved in worship is not simply a matter of personal preferences, age or cultural background. I am more and more persuaded that worship is merely an indication of the different concepts of God among the membership. There is a Latin saying that goes, "Lex orandi, lex credendi," it means "As the man worships, that is how he believes." Yes it is true, how we worship God is how we see Him and how we see God dictates the way we live.

You may be thinking to yourself, "Pastor O'Fall, you are trying to divide us. What you are saying is divisive." No, friend, what I am doing is merely describing what is happening and as I mentioned earlier this is not something that is just happening in our own denomination. The issue of worship is causing concern in many quarters outside our own church.

What shall we do then? Personally I think one thing that we could do to resolve this at least for the moment would be to simply use Christian courtesy. The apostle Paul is clear that we must not do something that knowingly offends the conscience of a weaker brother. In 1 Cor 8:12,13 it says, "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." Though this is talking specifically about eating meat offered to idols the principle is the same. We are not to intentionally offend each other.

In the matter of the contemporary worship styles I definitely consider myself among the weak. We who are weak in this respect not only have a sensitive conscience about rock rhythms in worship but we have the same standard for our lives when we are not in church.

In the same respect those of us who have a sensitive conscience about doing theater in the worship service don't go to the theater and a growing number are deep sixing the TV. Betty and I don't have a TV. We raised our children without one. Somehow we have survived. We are up-to date on the news without having to watch the evening news. So to answer the question is it possible to live without TV the answer is "yes". In fact life without the TV is a fuller, richer, cleaner and more peaceful life. It is difficult if not impossible for the Holy Spirit to put into us the mind of Christ when we are needlessly exposing ourselves to the things that are watched by the average Christian.

I believe we can make our worship services meaningful to those who are serious about worshiping a holy God and pleasing to Him without having the congregation go to sleep. I must warn you though that inasmuch as spiritual things are spiritually discerned, a person who is used to the life of the world could find church at times uninteresting and even boring. I think that is something that a person must solve between them and God and bringing a band or a puppet show to church is not the way to go about it.

Let me speak for a moment about puppet shows and drama. Our life in the nineties tends to be largely fantasy, from sports to videos and virtual reality. I am sad to tell you on one hand but happy to tell you on the other, that the Christian life and its worship of a Holy God is not a fantasy, we don't need to simulate it in some kind of drama, we can actually share with each other what God is doing in our lives and we can do that without having a rap rhythm in the background.

God is calling His people everywhere to separate themselves from the pleasures of the world. Job 14:4 "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one." And in 2 Cor 6:17, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

I visit churches in many places. I often see worship services that are vibrant and alive. They are full enthusiasm and spirit and yet there is nothing there that would offend the weak. On the other hand, I was in one church not long ago and for the children's story they had a hand puppet show. It was done by the children themselves. The children provided the arms and the voices but the ones that were acting out the story of Daniel were grotesque Sesame Street characters. You may not find any problem with that. I do. In the first place it was more fantasy. My wife was reading to me from an article in which it was saying that our children in this generation have a hard time distinguishing between reality and fantasy. It is no wonder that when they grow up they will treat a basketball game as reality and their marriages as fantasy.

I cannot see how we are honoring our Holy God in whose presence angels veil their faces when we represent his workings in the life of the men and women of scripture through the medium of lesser life forms. For many young people Lion King has more meaning than Jesus who will come to this world one day soon as King of kings and Lord of lords. My brother, My sister, we must not simply sit back and think that whatever gets a good laugh must be to the glory of God. Isaiah saw God and he didn't laugh or give Him a round of applause.

Listen to this from Isaiah the sixth chapter. " In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Just in case you may think, "but Pastor O'Ffill, that is just an Old Testament concept," listen to this from Heb. 12:28, 29, "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire."

I greatly fear that our trend in the nineties to mix the sacred with the profane is indeed playing with fire. We sing that our God is an awesome God, and indeed He is, but that word is now used to describe most anything from a touchdown to a horse race. It is no wonder we worship a cheap god. May God have mercy on our generation that has mixed the sacred with the profane until we are often no longer able to discern the holiness of God from a clown in a polka-dotted suit with frizzy green hair and a red ball for a nose who is telling us that Jesus loves us.

I have not told you anything new. I have merely described what is going on. I plead, before it is too late. let us as individuals and as congregations seek the Lord while he still may be found. Let us call upon Him while he is nigh. Let us forsake our wicked ways and let us return unto the Lord. And the promise that gives us hope is that when we do, He will abundantly pardon.