

Leadership in Praise and Worship: Learning From Past Mistakes

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The world of the professional rock/pop music industry was my life and existence for 16 years. I worked in South Africa and Europe as a composer, live performer, and session musician, and, for a time, was signed to the company Polydor Records in Hamburg, Germany. Thankfully though, the Lord, by His grace, finally brought me to my senses and rescued me from a situation that nearly cost me not only my temporal, but also eternal life.

From the day I gave my life to Jesus, I began intensive research into the language of music—from a musicological, physiological, psychological, and Biblical perspective. The issue of music and worship became the focus of my study, and soon a ministry developed that now takes me to countries around the world, where I share a Bible-centered understanding of this vital issue.

After many years of dealing first-hand with so many different issues connected to the music and worship controversy, I have come to some very basic conclusions as to what the underlying problems are—particularly from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective. I will briefly summarize—not in a particular order of priority:

1. Worship, in the contemporary, “user-friendly” environment, has become more about pleasing man than God; thus, we have lost the prime focus of worship.
2. Because of the desire to “please ourselves” we have no desire any more to correctly interpret the Scriptures on the topic of worship (a small collection of assorted texts that refer to drums, dancing, clapping, and the raising of hands has become the basis for our doctrine/teaching on this issue).

3. Many have developed a remarkable aversion to the Bible's and Ellen White's many clear, unambiguous statements on what God expects from us in the worship we bring to Him.
4. In a desperate attempt to attract and retain their unconverted youth and the "unchurched," some in church leadership (from the loftiest positions down to the lay worship leader) have dared to receive instruction from the "broken cisterns" of Egypt.

As a result of the above factors, an increasing number of leaders are adopting all kinds of questionable practices in their worship and evangelistic services, creating much confusion, division, and bewilderment in many local churches, camp meetings and youth events.

The worship paradigm shift of the present age, and the apostasy that has often followed in its wake, is not something new. This has happened since the earliest days of man's fall into sin; the Scriptures are replete with example after example. Amazingly, six thousand years down the line, it would appear that we still have not learned from history. But learn we must. For Mrs. Ellen G. White has warned us: "Those things which have been in the past will be in the future. Satan will make music a snare by the way in which it is conducted. *God calls upon His people, who have the light before them in the Word and in the Testimonies, to read and consider, and to take heed*" (*Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 38, emphasis mine).

In light of the above counsel, perhaps some examples from Seventh-day Adventist history and the Bible might help to illustrate how easy it is for Satan to trap worship leaders into repeating past mistakes. We shall begin by first looking at the holy purpose of music.

The Holy Purpose of Music

Seventh-day Adventists have received abundant counsels from Ellen G. White regarding the purpose of worship music and where models of such music can be found.

She wrote: “Music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God.”ⁱ In contrast to music found in a world where the strongest impulse is to employ music “to exalt self, instead of using it to glorify God,” she counsels that “we should endeavor, in our songs of praise, to approach as nearly as possible to the harmony of the heavenly choirs.”ⁱⁱ

A study of Mrs. White’s writings reveals that in music patterned after the heavenly choirs, the singing must be in “clear, soft tones,” “not with harshness and shrillness that offend the ear,” “not *loud* singing,” but “clear intonation,” “correct pronunciation,” and “distinct utterance.”ⁱⁱⁱ Such music ought to have “beauty, pathos, and power.”^{iv}

Good singing, she emphasized, is “subdued and melodious,” like the music of the birds.^v Dramatic, operatic style is out of place.^{vi} “Sharp, rasping voices” are likewise inappropriate.^{vii} Thus, the voices of those singing need to be “modulated, softened, and subdued.” Heavenly melodies are described as “cheerful, yet solemn,” but “not funeral tones.”^{viii}

Mrs. White encouraged the tasteful use of musical instruments; however, she was emphatic that it is better never to have the worship of God blended with music than to use musical instruments to create “a bedlam of noise” that shocks the senses and perverts the worship. “The Holy Spirit never reveals [Himself] in such methods, in such a bedlam of noise.”^{ix}

She stressed that music suited to the stage was foreign to the worship context. Forced or strained vocal deliveries that emphasize loudness, along with undignified, unrefined gestures and “acting attitudes,” are out of keeping with the worship atmosphere of Heaven. The “softer,” “finer,” “sweeter,” “more silvery strains” are “more like angel music,” whereas opposite attributes tend to be driven by self-centered “love of praise.”^x

Prophecy About Adventist Worship Music

Sadly, instead of patterning our worship music on the heavenly choir, Sister White prophesied that shortly before the coming of Christ, leaders will import worldly patterns for our worship services—just as it happened at an infamous Indiana camp meeting in her day. She wrote: “The things you have described as taking place in Indiana, *the Lord has shown me would take place just before the close of probation. Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated. There will be shouting, with drums, music, and dancing. The senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions. And this is called the moving of the Holy Spirit*” (*Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 36, emphasis mine).

It was in connection with the above warning and counsel that Sister White spoke about history repeating itself in the future on the issue of music. In a November 1, 1903 letter, addressed to A.G. Daniells, the then-General Conference president, she wrote: “Again and again I have been shown that the past experiences of God’s people are not to be counted as dead facts. We are not to treat the record of these experiences as we would treat a last year’s almanac. The record is to be kept in mind, *for history will repeat itself.*”^{xi}

Although many Adventists are familiar with Sister White’s warning and counsel regarding the Indiana camp meeting, very few are aware of what led to the events that occurred there, and what aspects of this occurrence would be repeated in our day.

“Praise and Worship Movement” in Early Adventism

There can be no doubt that, in some way or other, past events will be replayed and a departure from God’s plan will be experienced. It is also certain, that un-Biblical worship and music—as experienced in the “praise and worship” movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—will have a role to play in these recurrences.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century a growing number of Seventh-day Adventists became convinced that the church was very close to experiencing the outpouring of the “latter rain.” R.W. Schwarz, the Adventist historian who authored *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (subtitled as “Denominational History Textbook for Seventh-day Adventist College Classes”), summed up those events. He wrote that the convictions concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were “*closely tied to the renewed emphasis on righteousness by faith that followed the 1888 General Conference in Minneapolis. A.F. Ballenger, a popular speaker on the camp meeting circuit, did much to increase this expectation through his powerful sermon ‘Receive Ye the Holy Ghost.’*”^{xii}

S.S. Davis, who was deeply impressed by Ballenger’s sermon, had been having contact with a “*number of Pentecostal Christians. He was deeply impressed by their enthusiasm, remarking to a fellow Adventist worker ‘they have the “spirit”; we have the truth, and if we had the “spirit” as they have, with the truth we could do things.’*”^{xiii}

Davis had an opportunity to “do things” when in November 1898 he was appointed Indiana Conference revivalist. With the support of conference president R.S. Donnell, Davis got together a worship team that began travelling around the state. They used a variety of musical instruments to “heighten the effect of their emotional appeals. Listeners were encouraged to raise their hands to Heaven, to shout and clap in their quest for the anointing of the Holy Spirit.”^{xiv}

It is interesting to notice how the whole movement unfolded: (1) the idea was inspired by another Christian group (in this case the Pentecostal churches); (2) the motivation was to bring “the Spirit” into the Adventist Church and promote “spiritual revival”; (3) this new way of worship was actively promoted by appointed church leadership and their worship teams; (4) a variety of musical instruments was employed to “heighten the effect of emotional appeals” (e.g., raising the hands, shouting, and clapping in a quest for the Spirit’s anointing).

Could it be that in our contemporary “praise and worship” practices, we are again following the same course—repeating a history that has been repeated as far back as the time of Old Testament Israel and before?

Let’s take a closer look at the events and the warnings given by Ellen White concerning this nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement. The events are recorded in a number of different places in her writings, thus indicating that it was not just an issue of passing consideration. The following is the essence of the statement as it appears in *Selected Messages*, book two: “The things you have described as taking place in Indiana, the Lord has shown me would take place just before the *close of probation*. Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated. There will be *shouting, with drums, music, and dancing*. The senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions. *And this is called the moving of the Holy Spirit.*”^{xv}

It is of no small significance to note that Ellen White does not say that these future projections are her own opinion. She makes it clear that this was a revelation from God. It is also clear that God showed her that these events would be repeated at the end—“just before the close of probation.” What we need to do is to try and understand the musical character of these Indiana demonstrations. After all, Ellen White’s concept of confusion and noise, through the medium of music, may be very different from ours.

As we have shown earlier, Sister White was not opposed to the use of musical instruments per se. It was *the way in which the music was conducted* at the Indiana camp meeting that should be of concern to us. Ellen White wrote that we would “[b]etter never have the worship of God blended with music than to use *musical instruments* to do the work which last January was represented to me would be brought into our camp meetings.”^{xvi} Defective music served as a catalyst.

Elder S.N. Haskell described the instruments and music in this way: “They have an organ, one bass viol, three fiddles, two flutes, three tambourines, three horns, and a big bass drum, and perhaps other instruments which I have not mentioned. They are as much trained in their musical line as any Salvation Army choir that you ever heard. In fact, their revival effort is simply a complete copy of the Salvation Army method. . . .”^{xvii}

The “band members” that played at this meeting were not just a group of amateur instrumentalists, bashing and clanging away in disorganized cacophony. They were trained and copied the musical style used by the Salvation Army. Compare any average Christian rock band of today with the music of a turn-of-the-century Salvation Army choir, and it would have to be stated that what Haskell heard was relatively tame by comparison—in volume and intensity. One can only imagine what Haskell would have described if he had heard and seen some of our amplified contemporary Christian worship rock bands. Today, with amplification, we are able to far exceed the levels of a nineteenth-century Salvation Army-style ensemble.

The question of whether or not—in the musical sense—we may be copying or exceeding the Indiana manifestations is, in light of what many others and I have witnessed, an established fact. If Ellen White described Indiana’s music as being “*a bedlam of noise,*” used by “*satanic agencies,*”^{xviii} then what would she say about what our desensitized twenty-first-century minds consider as music worthy of being presented to a Holy God?

Ellen White spoke of music and activities accompanying a false end-time “*supposed revival,*”^{xix} and said that the “*senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions.*”^{xx}

Of course it was impossible, at the time, to picture how it would all unfold in the future. It would be very difficult to inspire Seventh-day Adventists to blatantly adopt musical and other concepts directly from the secular world—especially after the painful experiences of the Indiana apostasy.

But, it might be easier to influence some of the other Protestant denominations to absorb strange worship customs and then, through them, tempt Adventists to adopt what appears to be effective, Spirit-filled worship and missionary strategy. Let's not forget that it was Pentecostal-style worship that so impressed S.S. Davis that he decided to bring it into Adventist camp meetings.

In ancient Israel Satan compromised God's people by encouraging them to adopt the worship methods of their pagan neighbors. What did the enemy do when he could not get Balaam to curse the Israelites? Balaam saw that if he (a religious ally, a "prophet of God") could convince them that the celebrations of the Midianites were not that bad, then they might just take the bait and be "*delighted with the music.*"^{xxi} Is there any reason we should be immune from the same tactics today?

Warnings and Lessons From Ancient Israel

From the earliest indications given in Scripture, it can be clearly ascertained that God gave instructions—set the parameters—for how worship to Him was to be conducted. This is an incontrovertible fact. The record of the Scriptures also reveal the disaster and pain that resulted when mankind decided to ignore God's order and followed their own inferior worship plan.

In Genesis 4 we read the account of Cain and Abel, and how an issue of worship became a catalyst in the very first murder that ever took place. Cain knew what God's worship plan was, but he began to rationalize the Lord's instruction. After all, he was a farmer who planted fruit. He was not a shepherd like his brother Abel. "Surely," he might have reasoned, "God will accept an offering that is more in line with my situation."

So, when the time came for the next offering to be given, Cain brought the harvest of his crops. Abel, as instructed, brought the “firstlings of his flock” (Genesis 4:3, 4). God showed that He accepted Abel’s offering but not Cain’s. Cain became angry and God tried to reason with him—to give him a chance. He told Cain that if he had done the right thing (followed the divine plan), then his sacrifice would have been accepted. He warned Cain that if he did not do the right thing, sin lay at the door. Cain chose not to listen. He argued with his brother, rose up against him, and, as the saying goes, the rest is history (Genesis 4:5-8).

The story of the golden calf (Exodus 32) is another example of man choosing to do it in his and not God’s way. The results of that saga were equally as disastrous. These two prime examples, among many others, clearly indicate the dangers of departing from God’s plan.

One of the clearest warnings given in Scripture regarding worship to God can be found in Deuteronomy, chapter 12. Here God made it very plain that there should be a distinction between the way in which the pagans worshipped their gods and how His people should worship Him: “Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, *How did these nations serve their gods? Even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God:* for every abomination to the Lord, which He hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: *thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it*” (vv. 30-32).

The point is abundantly clear, and its application, in principle, to our present time is also more than apparent. Simply put, we are not to look at the world around us (Babylon, a fallen neo-pagan, secularized society that has found its way into many denominations that once claimed the “Bible and the Bible alone” as their standard of faith), and ask, “How do they *do* worship? We would like to do it the same way.” The Israelites made that mistake on a number of occasions, Davis and his Pentecostal-inspired “holy flesh” worship team made the

same mistake at the turn of the nineteenth century, and we are making the same mistake in our present age.

God told the Israelites that they were to observe everything that *He* had commanded them. The matter of worship was not left up to the individual and his personal preference. The worship principles that we are to take from the Scriptures, as a guide for our praise and worship today, should be gleaned from the worship concepts practiced in the earthly sanctuary—which was a copy of the heavenly plan. This thought was most effectually expressed when Ellen White wrote: “From the *sacredness* which was attached to the earthly sanctuary, Christians may learn how they should regard the place where the Lord meets with His people. . . . The *reverence* which the people had anciently for the sanctuary, where they met with God in sacred service, has largely passed away. Nevertheless *God Himself gave the order of His service, exalting it high above everything of a temporal nature.*”^{xxii}

God was not trying to get His people to reflect the temporal/earthly in their worship. He was trying to lift them high above it, bringing them closer to the heavenly. He was the One Who gave the order for the worship plan knowing that man, in his fallen sinful condition, could not properly comprehend the significance of coming to worship in the presence of a holy God.

1 Chronicles 23:2-5 tells us about the divisions of the Levites (the priestly tribe). In verse 5 we read that *4,000 Levites* were chosen to be musicians in the house of the Lord. On the surface it may seem a rather ordinary thing to do, to delegate the musicians for worship; we do this today. It’s just one of those things that is needed to have more effectual leadership and musicality in song and praise. But here, in this commission for 4,000 musicians, we see no common consideration; and I am not referring to the fact that there was such a large number chosen. More specifically, I am referring to the origin of these musicians.

The 4,000 musicians that were chosen were from the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe—men who were deeply committed to God. This concept has a very significant bearing on God’s modern-day Israel, that “royal priesthood” and “peculiar people” carrying out an important mission in the closing hours of this world’s history—a people who should endeavor to stay unspotted from the evil in the world around them.

If our worship music, as God’s modern-day Israel, is not carried out in spiritual commitment and obedience to God, then it is a dead, empty form, regardless of how active and vibrant (spirited) it may appear from the outside. It is possible to have all the signs of outward action, even favorable statistics in numbers, but still, within, to be as dead as a heap of dry bones.

God does not see the way that man sees. It is not enough that we simply direct our worship music towards God. We also want to make sure, as the Biblical musicians did, that our music is pleasing to God: “*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord . . .*” (Psalm 19:14; see also Psalm 104:33, 34 and Romans 12:1).

Some Closing Remarks

False revivals are often promoted by leaders who have departed from the light God has given. They became people-pleasers, giving into the demands of a culture of worship that focuses more on the demands of the creature than the Creator.

This present generation is controlled by the overriding desire to satisfy self; passion has become the standard that controls their lives (2 Timothy 3:1-5). They speak of being culturally relevant, but if there would be anything in any culture, past or present, that would not satisfy their desires, they would reject it just as readily as they reject anything else that does not suit their fallen taste.

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- ⁱ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 594.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 143, 144.
- ^{iv} White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 325.
- ^v White, *Evangelism*, p. 510.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} White, *Evangelism*, pp. 507, 508.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 36.
- ^x White, Ms. 5, 1874, in *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 335.
- ^{xi} White, Letter 238, November 1, 1903, in *Publishing Ministry*, p. 175, emphasis mine.
- ^{xii} R.W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1979), p. 447, emphasis mine.
- ^{xiii} Ibid., emphasis mine.
- ^{xiv} Ibid., emphasis mine.
- ^{xv} White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 36, emphasis mine.
- ^{xvi} Ibid., emphasis mine.
- ^{xvii} S.N. Haskell to EGW, September 25, 1900, in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), vol. 5, p. 102.
- ^{xviii} White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 36, emphasis mine.
- ^{xix} White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 5, p. 108, emphasis mine.
- ^{xx} White, *Selected Messages*, p. 36, emphasis mine.
- ^{xxi} White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, pp. 326, 327, emphasis mine.
- ^{xxii} White, *Child Guidance*, p. 540, emphasis mine.