

# OUR SONGS MATTER

*How should the Church determine what songs we sing  
both individually and together (corporately)?*

January 13, 2022 – Pastor Matt

## **Introduction**

John Piper called worship “the ultimate goal of the church”. I believe He is correct. It is an eternal action, joining all of heaven in worship that goes on day and night (Rev 4). Now, don’t mistake me (or Pastor Piper!), corporate singing should not be our only form of worship; It shouldn’t even be our primary form (Rom 12). Our entire lives are to be given to God in a sacrificial act of worship. That said, singing matters. Truly. Singing was created by God and ordained by Him for His praise:

- God the Father sings over us. (Zephaniah 3)
- He is *enthroned* upon praise. (Psalm 22)
- Our Lord and Savior sang with His disciples. (Matthew 26)
- All of creation is told to sing His praise. (I Chronicles 16)
- The largest book of the Bible is filled with musical prayer and worship. (Psalms)
- Most of the Psalms were written by a man “after God’s own heart”. (I Sam 13)
- The Church is told to sing with each other. (Ephesians 5, Colossians 3)
- In Revelation, a new song will be sung, and all of creation will join it. (Rev 5)

And those are just to name a very few things that God has revealed to us about music through His Word. Our worship through song matters, and this worship (as all worship) must be acceptable (Heb 12). So, how much emphasis ought we put on *what* exactly we sing? I think the answer is: a lot. Worshipping anyone who is not God is idolatry. But worshipping God as someone other than He is and has revealed Himself to be: also idolatry (John 4). Worshipping God as other than He is (i.e., not in truth) will not only miss the mark of worship, but it will lead us astray – ultimately away from Him. A couple quotes from A.W. Tozer’s *The Knowledge of the Holy* sum this up:

*“The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place.”*

*“To be right we must think worthily of God. It is morally imperative that we purge from our minds all ignoble concepts of the Deity and let Him be the*

*God in our minds that He is in His universe. The Christian religion has to do with God and man, but its focal point is God, not man. Man's only claim to importance is that he was created in the divine image; in himself he is nothing."*

To sing words about God which are untrue is to bring idolatry into worship. Think on that. To sing lies and errors to God, while pretending they are truths... how sad that would be. How sad for Him to hear that "worship". How sad for us to sing it. We must do everything we can to make sure our words are, first and foremost, true.

So, we know worship matters. Singing matters. What we think and speak of God matters. God can be worshiped only in truth, and Scripture is His gift of truth to us. Maybe we should only sing lyrics that come directly from the Bible? No. I don't think so. That command is never given in the Bible, but rather, the Bible clearly instructs us to sing *new* songs to the Lord (Psalm 98, among others). Our God is a creative God, and He has made us, a creative people, in His image. I believe He longs for our new songs. And I think it is easy and clear for us to understand why. When my kids were little and colored me these cute, adoring little birthday cards, I cherished them. And year after year, the cards changed. The themes and messages (and penmanship! ☺ ) matured. And I cherished each and every new message. Were they to continue coloring and writing the same simple messages in their teen years that they did in their toddler years ... something would be missing. I cherished the old cards, but I cherish the new all the more. It is nice to remember what was in their hearts years ago, but there's nothing like hearing what is in their hearts *now*. Similarly, God wants us to keep singing our new songs to Him, proclaiming what He has revealed of Himself, calling on Him for help, and praising Him for what He has done.

But let's get down to it. How do we dare even try to weed through the thousands and thousands of worship songs written throughout the centuries and select what we sing at Hope? In my years of leading worship, I've had the opportunity and task of evaluating hundreds of new songs. To my discredit, I have not always been consistent and thorough in my evaluation of songs, and humbly, my knowledge of the Word is often insufficient (as is the knowledge of each of us – this a reminder for study & community & discipleship. Praise God that we do not minister in isolation!). Nonetheless, we each have a role; we each have a part to play in this body of Christ. We must humbly, diligently, and passionately pursue Christ as we serve to fulfill the roles that He has given to us. Selecting music is part of my role at Hope, and I do my best to serve the Lord first and you all second in that responsibility. I know I am accountable to Him for everything I teach and sing about Him. But as I mentioned before, it's not a task I attempt to tackle alone. I often rely on the other pastors, elders, worship leaders, and members of the church to support me and advise me in this task.

## The 7 Questions

So, with the importance of worship established, our personal limitations confessed, let's chat about how we at Hope generally select the songs that we sing.

Week in and week out, when a new song comes up, we typically ask 7 questions:

(These questions are in a general order of importance)

- 1) Are the song lyrics Biblical?
- 2) Is it a good song?
- 3) Is it a good song for corporate worship?
- 4) Can our band/singers play it well?
- 5) Can the church sing it?
- 6) Would our church want to sing it? Or, relatedly, do they *need* to sing it?
- 7) Does the song have any "baggage"?

Let's briefly discuss each of the 7 questions.

### **1) Are the song lyrics Biblical?**

We've already reviewed this a bit, but in every church this ought to be the ultimate veto check. If a song is not Biblical, if its lyrics do not align with a truth that we see in Scripture, if the lyrics are so vague as to be meaningless or easily twisted, then the song is not a good worship song.

Period.

The music we sing must be true, proclaiming what God has revealed of Himself and His creation, or, as David often did in Psalms: speaking to God our cares, concerns, fears, and joys – for He cares for us. As an aside, I will say that I think this is the one and only area that should be consistently critiqued by the Church as a whole. In most areas of ministry (and life) criticism ought to be requested. It ought to be given only within the confines of a role (pastor/elder) or relationship (mentor, trusted friend). But if a song we sing at Hope is not Biblical, it is the **responsibility** of every member of the church to gently pull the worship leader aside and humbly discuss the areas in question. (Note: this also ought to extend to parents as we listen to music with our children in the car and at home. We must discuss when a song does not agree with the Word of God, otherwise we will be raising a generation to believe lies, half-truths, and misleading thoughts about God.)

## **2) Is it a good song?**

This is a loaded question! What makes music good is so subjective, cultural, generational, etc. It is even situational and subject to our mood. Because what makes a song “good” is so subjective, we do need to take a moment to remember to hold the music we sing with a significant amount of grace – to do our best to worship in every circumstance and with every song. To assess whether or not we generally like a song is fine and natural. However, for me to sit stone-faced, refusing to sing a song simply because I do not like the music or the lyrical phrasing, well... I think there’s a problem there. If you’re like me, you’ve done this before – and I regret it. If a song is Biblical and someone is offering it up as praise to God, there ought to be nothing in the world that could keep me from joining in! Think of sitting next to Paul in prison. He’s ready to praise the gates open and rattle the chains right off... But we don’t join, because we don’t like the song he selected. Mercy. It should be laughable to us. But how many times have I done this? Many. My hope is that I will never do it again.

Now that said, just because a song is good lyrically, doesn’t mean it’s a good song. One might think a song is not good lyrically, another instrumentally, another melodically, and on and on. And sweet mercy do I agree! There is a lot of bad music out there (I’m looking at you polka). Several songs we have sung at Hope, as I look back, I would now say – that just wasn’t a very good song. In any case, we try to find music at Hope that a significant part of our congregation will enjoy lifting up to God. Our desire is that these songs will remain on our lips, encouraging us to worship throughout the week. One of the biggest things we have to guard against regarding “good” music and worship is this: singing a song that is inaccurate or vague lyrically just because it is an amazing song musically. We must always remember that we need to first look at the lyrics Biblically, then evaluate the rest.

## **3) Should it be sung in corporate worship?**

There are many good and Biblical songs that I’ve come across over the years that simply weren’t ideal to sing in a corporate setting. The entire Song of Solomon comes to mind. Here you have a poetic book of passionate love songs. Written as a metaphor relating the love between a man and his wife to the love of Christ and His Church, it is a beautiful and profound part of the Bible. However, I would never suggest it for corporate singing. All people of Hope, from 1 to 101 years old are being asked to lift these songs of worship to our God. We should not ask them to sing words that don’t make sense to them or have little-to-nothing to do with their current phase of life. I have heard that it is a common practice even in the Jewish community to not allow their children to study Song of Solomon until they are mature. Likewise, there are many songs that, though Biblical, they use mixed metaphors that simply make the songs more suited to more personal times of worship with the Lord.

There are even certain laments in the Psalms that would fall into this category. In Psalm 38, David cries out,

*“O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.  
For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon  
me. Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have  
no soundness because of my sin.”*

Wow. If you're like me, you have had moments in your life where it felt as if the wrath of God had come upon you, where the weight of your sin was unbearable – and you needed a Savior. But for believers, is that an accurate, ongoing lament that we should sing together today? No (or at least not without great explanation for why we are singing it). For we have the gift that David did not yet have. We have the sacrifice of Christ. And *He* has paid the ultimate price for us and saved us from the very wrath of God (Rom 5). So, ought we now sing about crying out to God to save us from His wrath? I don't think so. Rather, we ought to confess our Lord, confess our sin, and then fall upon and praise the guarantee of His grace through Christ. Laments like some of those in Psalm 38 are beautiful and precious. They ought to be read, taught, known, and understood. Some were even written prophetically, describing what our gracious Savior would endure for us. However, for a corporate worship song today, some of these laments would make many a young believer quite confused if sung from our point of view.

To clarify, general songs of lament, confession, or repentance are vital for the believer and most definitely ought to be sung. However, carefully watching for ideas like the wrath of God might save some young believers from thinking we are still under the very law that Christ came to fulfill.

#### **4) Can our band/singers play it well?**

I won't spend much time on this, but it comes up often. There are some songs that we listen to and love that we simply cannot play well enough to lead. Some old hymns fall into this category, so also do many new songs that integrate digital effects, layered tracks, dozens of instruments, choirs, orchestras, etc. Sometimes we'll come across a vocal range in a song that is just ... out of reach. If we can simplify the song and still do it justice, great! But many times we simply say: this song is for worshiping in the car. ☺ The worship team's first job in leading worship is: worshipping. Playing an extremely difficult piece poorly is quite a distraction for a musician (and many a congregation member), so we try to stick with the musical arrangements that God has gifted us to play. And as we can, we work on our craft, so we can offer more and more of our talent to Him to use as He wills.

## **5) Can the church sing it?**

This is definitely related to #4 above. We will often find songs right on the edge, where we as a band can take a handful of hours and study a song well enough to lead it, but it's just a bit too hard for the congregation as a whole to sing. So the result is people stop singing. In the arena of worship leading, that's generally a bad thing. ☺ Songs from some of my favorite artists often fall into this category: Josh Garrels, Andrew Peterson, or Jon Foreman. Beautiful songs. Biblical songs. The band knows them and can sing/play them. But mercy... just so many lyrics or odd melody lines that we generally don't do them. Or we might on the rare occasion do one as a "special" song if it ties into the sermon that week. Again, as worship leaders our goal is to worship and to invite Hope as a community to join us in worship. We truly desire that the church sing – sing loud the praises of our God. Complicated or challenging songs are best used sparingly. Entertainment is always a part of playing music. After all, music (when done well) will always be entertaining. But entertainment is not our goal (another good article for another time). Worshiping the Lord together is our goal. As a church, we should walk away from church thinking: "Wow, what an amazing God", not: "Wow, what an amazing singer/band."

## **6) Would our church want to sing it? Or, relatedly, do they *need* to sing it?**

The desire to worship is a beautiful thing and should be cultivated. And even when the *feeling* is not there, God is blessed by the faithful offering of our sacrifice of thanksgiving (Psalm 50). That said, there are definitely songs that resonate with specific people, groups, and cultures. Additionally, there are times when we as a people are walking away from God in a certain area, and a song of rebuke, repentance, or lament is appropriate and desired from our God. As worship leaders, part of our role is to be sensitive to the Spirit, while staying connected to the people we are called to lead. Sometimes the simplest of songs can encourage in us a maturity of thought about our God. I have heard it said of simple songs, "This song is so repetitive. It's just boring. I can't worship with it." The statement, I believe, was made honestly and with a desire to praise God deeply. However, the statement is also, well... often immature. I can say that because I've made this statement before. So, I speak from significant experience in immaturity! ☺ As we walk through the Psalms, we will definitely find profound, deep, complex songs of worship. But we also must keep in mind, the height of worship is happening where? In the throne room. In the fullness of His awesome presence. And what exactly does scripture tell us is being spoken around the throne? Of all the many, many, thousands upon thousands of words sung to God throughout all time, what is being said day and night, without ceasing?

*"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev 4)*

Over ... and over ... and over ... God does not seem to bore hearing it. And His angels do not seem to bore saying it. Why? Because it is true. And I think because His perfect holiness, His ultimate might, His eternal nature, these attributes are His and His alone. In the end, when we are fully in His presence, how many of our songs will boil down to these profound thoughts of God? Thoughts we will never truly grasp here on this earth.

Now again, don't get me wrong. This is not to say that we always ought to repeat the same thing over and over, never singing anything other than those words. That is not what the Bible says. But it definitely would seem that we ought to think twice and maybe evaluate our own heart when we criticize a song for being boring or too repetitive. It might not be the words of the song that need to change, to grow, or to get deeper. It might be us. In the seemingly shallow foundational truths of God and His Word, there are immense oceans of depth to be explored.

So, is a song rich in meaning, like Psalm 119? Is a song simple, profound, and true – proclaiming the very nature of God, like Revelation 4? Is a song expressing a simple truth for a new believer, like Highlands? Is a song full of the lifelong experience of walking with Christ, like Rock of Ages? Is a song calling us to return, repent, and lament where we have gone, like Psalm 51? I would suggest all these songs ought to be sung.

## **7) Consider the source: Does the song have any baggage?**

This is a tough question. To answer it, we'll go over multiple points of view. This is not a question I had to answer at all in many years past, but it comes up more and more often in today's *overly* connected culture. Say we have a song that is Biblical, well-written, relevant for many in the church, playable, singable... and yet, very possibly a failure when it comes to facilitating worship in a particular congregation. Why?

The song has baggage for us and that baggage distracts.

It distracts our minds away from God, away from truth, and away from worship. It could be the singer or writer of a song – maybe they're walking away from God. Or maybe it's the church or congregation from which the song arose - a church that we believe is actively engaging in unbiblical teaching.

So, we need to answer a question, and that question is this:

*Do we need to consider the source of a song when deciding whether or not to sing it during corporate worship on a Sunday?*

(Keep in mind, that "source" could be the song-writer, the performer, or the affiliated home church / denomination.)

Let's cut to the chase. I think the answer is a resounding: no ... but sadly, yes. Or put another way – yes, we need to consider the source, but I wish we didn't. And as we dig in deeper here, I think we'll see that considering the source is very, very complicated in music today. I think we'll also see that "source" might not mean what we think it means.



As with all complicated questions, I think it helps to answer this one carefully and thoroughly, relying heavily on the Word of God for our guidance. We'll go over why I think the Bible says that the *earthly* source of a song or message truly doesn't matter. And we'll also dive in to why I think it is still a good idea for us, in this time and place, to consider the source of a song we use for corporate worship at Hope.

First, *all truth* is God's. Jesus even identified Himself as *the truth* (John 14). More than that, everything that is good in this world came from Him (James 1). This is important to remember! If *[insert the worst, most unbiblical musician or band you can think of here]*, if *they* stumbled upon (or were given!) some truth about God the Father, of the Son, or of the Spirit, and they dumped it in a song, then that truth... came from God. From where else could it have come? If it is true, it is His. When we sing, "A mighty fortress is our God!", we are not simply singing the words of Martin Luther. We are proclaiming truth about our God. Luther read this in the Bible (Psalm 91), or maybe he learned about it in the echoing glory of God's creation, or maybe he was blessed with it by the Spirit. No matter the vehicle by which it arrived to Luther, these words are ambassadors of the Lord, because they are true. The *source* of these words, truly, is God Himself.

The idea of finding truth, even in the secular world, and then claiming it as God's truth, this is nothing new. I did not come up with it. We see this very idea of claiming truth from Paul in Acts 17.

*"Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.*

*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "* Acts 17:22-28



Consider those last two quotes:

‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’

and

‘We are his offspring.’

These quotes were originally penned by Epimenides (c. ~6th century B.C.), a Cretan seer and poet, and the latter most likely by Aratus (c. 310-245 B.C.), though some think it came from Cleanthes. Both of these quotes were originally referring to the false god, Zeus.

Take a moment to really think about what Paul just said... what God just did! Paul took words, ascribed by unbelievers, to a god they didn't really know; he took THOSE words, and said: you know that God? The one that made everything, the one that you believe exists, but you can't see Him? I know Him. I know why you came up with this altar to Him. He is and has been revealing Himself to you.

Paul claimed God's truth, written by unbelievers, and then God (through Luke) placed these very words in Scripture. Let that sink in.

*“For in Him we live and move and have our being.”* I have quoted this many times, as have many. It is in sermons and songs. It is true. It is worth knowing. Worth memorizing. Worth *singing*. ...and it wasn't originally written by a believer. To say that these words would have had baggage for new Christians in Athens would be an understatement, and yet, Paul used these words to show the glory of God. And the Spirit of God continues to use them today to do the same.

Second, save for the direct words of God the Father or Christ Himself in Scripture, all other written or verbal truth comes to us through a broken vessel – man (ok, or maybe an angel or donkey here or there).

Let's consider King David. A murderer, an adulterer, a thief, a man driven by lust, and an abuser of power. His sins even passed down to his children, wreaking havoc in his family for generations. I think if David were alive today, writing the Psalms in this current generation, we (the Church) would have written him off. We would look at his life, conclude that he was a mess and that his music could not be of worth and should not be sung – “Just look at what he has done!”, we would say. “He cannot be a Christian. I'm not singing his songs.” I think we would get rid of Psalms if this all happened in this modern culture. This precious book that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, often quoted, a book that He Himself confirmed was written *in the Spirit* (Matthew 22), it would be dumped and forgotten.

That ought to be a warning for us, or at least encourage us to pause in prayer before we remove content from our lives for reasons other than its truth or lack thereof. We live in a “cancel culture”, a culture that rejects, throws out, and despises anything and everything they do not completely understand or agree with, especially if it is written by a person with whom they differ. But that is not who we, the Church, are supposed to be. We are to be wise, patient, and filled with the peace of Christ (Col 3). To the Greeks, Paul became a Greek and claimed truths the Greeks would understand. To the Jew, he became a Jew. To the weak, he became weak. Why? That he might win as many as possible for our Lord (1 Cor. 9). For it is Christ that is all. Christ that is all that matters. We do not follow Paul. Nor do we follow Randy, or Dave, or any other man. And we do not implicitly trust Phil Wickham or Shane & Shane to provide us with *true* worship music. We follow Christ. And we test everything, holding fast to what is good (1 Thes. 5).

Third, I want us to think about how difficult it is to truly identify the human source of a song – especially when we are trying to consider the *holiness or righteousness* of that source. Because that’s what we are trying to do, correct? We’re not just saying, “I won’t listen to Matt Poling because he’s written incorrect things in the past”. That’s obvious. I’m human. I’ve definitely written and spoken incorrect and unbiblical things. We all have. So that’s not our point. Our point truly is to go so far as to say that “so and so” is not a true believer (or at the very least a very young and misguided believer), and they are leading people astray – so stay away from their stuff. This ... is a very bold statement to make about someone. And unless they come right out and say they are not a believer (as is the case for a couple musicians we’ll talk about in a minute), we need to tread very carefully here.

But for the sake of discussion, let’s consider a very controversial church today, Bethel. Rightfully so, there are many people that consider some of Bethel’s teaching to be unbiblical. Various sermons and books that have come from that community have definitely been questionable and maybe even unbiblical. Note, however, that this is not a discourse on what Bethel believes, as I am no expert on the topic. I have read things from them that I disagree with. I have listened to songs “from Bethel” (more on this in a bit), I disagree with. But I also know that Bethel’s statement of **belief** on their website<sup>1</sup> is one of the most thorough, well-written and Biblical statements of faith that I’ve ever read in my life. Additionally, with the sheer size of Bethel’s community, schools, and production businesses, for me to keep track of musicians as they go in and out of that institution (let alone what each of them believe) is quite simply an exercise in futility. Lastly, what do I do with excellent worship leaders and song writers like Phil Wickham, who then go write songs with their friends at Bethel or go perform at Bethel’s school of music? Do I sing the song because it came from Phil? Or do I throw it out because it came from Bethel? What if *all* of the lyrics came from Phil and maybe just some of the melody from Bethel? How do I figure that out? What if there are 3, or 4, or 5 listed authors of a song (not uncommon)? How in the world do we assess the song’s source then? We don’t. We can’t. It’s simply not reasonable. I hope you see the utter frustration

that leading worship in this modern culture can sometimes be. I simply do not know, not truly, the heart of any musician. The only thing I can truly test are the words of their songs. And that test, thankfully, is one in which the entire congregation can (and should) assist.

Finally, I've often heard (and even spoken) the idea that, I can't listen to this or that band, because I don't want to support them financially, or I don't want to guide people into listening to more of their music, teachings, or tweets. The song, again, is great. It's Biblical. It's beautiful. But we don't want to support a "bad" band or a band that is known to be from a denomination that supports unbiblical teaching. If I use a song from a church that I know has some questionable or unbiblical teaching, am I then encouraging our youth and even my own kids to seek out more music or even teachings from that church? These are not simple questions. But as a pastor, a parent, and believer in Christ, I can't shrug off the hard questions. We must discuss them. Again here, I think the short answer to this question is, no. No, I don't think we are encouraging our youth by *simply* allowing them to listen to a song. I think we *are* encouraging them by allowing them to listen or watch *alone*.

There used to be a day when certain digital mediums (radio, tv, movies, etc.) were considered "safe". When we could allow our kids to go to the movies, or turn on the tv or radio, knowing that they wouldn't come across anything significantly inappropriate or ungodly. Those days are gone. Long gone. Dead and buried gone. Digital mediums are no longer safe places (and I'm not really sure they ever were, though they definitely used to be *safer*). The same should be said of musical artists. Some are healthy, others are not, but a scant few are theologians. Mercy, few theologians are really theologians if you ask me. ☺ Our kids today need guidance, and that guidance must include involved parents, siblings, pastors, teachers, and friends. The children of this next generation must be discerning. Must. To teach them that one band is good, while another band is bad is not very helpful in today's world. Worse, as I hope you're starting to see, it is not accurate. And it wasn't accurate back in Paul's day either. Men are flawed. And we need to constantly surround ourselves with His Word and with Godly community, else we will head down the broad path ... and it's not called broad because it's narrow. Heh. Old joke. Our children need to become proclaimers of God, His truth, and His glory. We must teach them not simply to try to assess what teacher or what musician is good or bad, but *why what they* teach or sing is good or bad, truth or a lie. Discerning the why is of infinitely greater value to themselves, to their faith, to their community/church, and to the world. Again, they must become proclaimers of the truth, as must we all.

When the Church stops proclaiming the truly good things that a society produces, then the only feedback society receives from the Church will be negative. And everyone, worldly and Godly alike, knows to reject that which is solely negative.

So given all of this, why do we need to evaluate the source or baggage of a song at all?

I think of incredible bands like Gungor, led by Michael Gungor, and beautiful singers like Audrey Assad. I have led worship using songs from both of them. They are both amazing musicians with what *seemed* like an incredible heart for the Lord. But my discernment was limited, for I only saw the outside of the cup. To see where they are now, it brings me to tears. It breaks my heart. They have deconstructed, “progressed”, rejected the truth of the Word of the living God, and are proudly encouraging others to do the same. It seems easy to now see that the Word of Christ never pierced their heart. Maybe it was only music, emotion, tradition, or fame for them, and now that culture has shifted its tide, they are just shifting with it. I don’t know. (Note about bold statements: I know I just wrote a warning about making bold statements about musicians. I wish I could say that I was making bold statements about Gungor and Ms. Assad. But sadly, their departure from the Word of God was published by themselves on their websites and twitter feeds. I’m simply paraphrasing what they have shouted – and continue to shout - to the world.)

So what do I say of the beautiful worship music they have written and performed in the past? The true words they spoke then, are they any less true because of the lies they now proclaim? No. The beautiful expressions and grandeur of their music, is it any less beautiful now? No. No, it is not. And yet, I have trouble singing or even listening to their music, because I know they are not walking with the Lord now (and apparently really never were). So despite the beauty and truth of their earlier music, their current, professed love for the world *distracts* me to the point that I no longer worship when I hear it. I only grieve. It causes my rather weak mind to stop worshiping. And if a song intended for worship causes you to stop worshipping, it’s time to set it aside. When it’s time to sit and pray for Michael or Audrey (and I do), then sometimes I pick up their songs again.

As a worship leader my goal is help the church worship. Truth is necessary. Yes. But also spirit. We, through the Spirit placed inside of us by God Himself, we must be actively involved in this proclamation of truth during worship. If we are not involved, (or at least aching to be involved) down to our very spirit, giving God all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, then we are missing the point. We are missing the mark. God desires us, so if a song or artist distracts, then despite the truth of that song, it is simply best not to sing it.

Lastly, as we close this section out, I want us to remember the weaker brother (Rom 14, 1 Cor. 8). We could have an entire lesson just on this idea. When things are repeated in Scripture, we should doubly take note, and the idea of laying down our rights for the benefit of and communion with our brother, this is an oft repeated theme in the Word. With a church of significant size, this does become increasingly difficult, but not impossible. Even if it felt impossible, we know that with our Lord all things are possible.

The mindset of taking care of our weaker brother really ought to permeate so many things we do in and around the church. But in the Sunday services themselves, I see this as absolutely vital for a thriving biblical community. If I know a song or artist causes my brother to be distracted to the point of not worshipping, I ought to do my best not to use it. Likewise, if there's a song that I know blesses many, but I myself struggle with its baggage, then as a pastor (someone who ought to be by definition strong in the faith) I ought to be able to allow my weaker brother to worship with it. This mindset of taking care of the weaker brother does not only mean we throw out songs that we think ought to be thrown out, but it also means we allow songs, songs which are true, to be sung, even if they are a struggle for us. As strong brothers and sisters in the faith, above all we need to realize this corporate service is not about us. It is all about Christ, and we need to do whatever we can, within the truth established by His Word, to encourage as many as possible to enter in.

## **Closing**

To sum up, you might say that the 7 questions above simply ask:

Should a song be sung?

Should it be sung here?

Should it be sung now?

*Truth* (the Word) guides us through the first question. And gifts of the *Spirit* (wisdom, knowledge, and discernment) guide us through the rest. And who is surprised? If we long to be true worshipers, we must worship in Spirit and Truth.

In the end, we must remember the point. We must remember the focus of worship:

*The Father, hallowed be His name. May His kingdom come. May His will be done.*

*The Son, Jesus - the Christ, our Savior, the Way, the Truth, the Life.  
At His name we will bow the knee and confess to all of creation that He is Lord.*

*And the Spirit, who dwells in us as a guarantee,  
may You teach us, guide us, fill us with your gifts and power.*

All else must fade in comparison to our God. We must not give our minds any excuse or foothold to not worship. For when we do, we place that thing above God. When we struggle to worship, we might not actively say these things below, but they can often be what we are communicating to our Lord:

“I’m sorry God; I can’t worship you...

... in the midst of a boring song  
... when the music style isn’t to my liking  
... when the volume is a bit too quiet  
... when the volume is a bit too loud  
... if the worship leader isn’t my favorite  
... because I’m not in the mood  
... because too many people are here  
... because too few people are here  
... \_\_\_\_\_”

Fill in your own. I don’t know how many of those I have actually spoken to God, but I have absolutely demonstrated each of them in my life. And in every scenario, worship became about me, my dream, my vision. It was not about Him. I remember another preacher I heard some time ago talking about a man that came to him after church and expressed that he really didn’t like any of the worship songs that morning. The pastor excitedly replied, “That’s ok! None of them were for you. In fact, I didn’t see your name in any of them.” Obviously, there’s a bit of exaggeration in that statement. As worship leaders, our team truly does try to find music that our community longs to sing. But when we miss the mark, our hope (for all of us) is that it would never stop us from worshipping. That even on the “worst” of Sundays, we could walk away simply saying, “The music was fine. The band was a blessing, and I know they did their best... but our God, He is glorious. I could worship Him anywhere.”

I pray that Hope will always be a people that remind each other to return to the essentials and find unity there. Worship, true worship, is an expression of awe, wonder, love, adoration, and thankfulness. Do worship experiences profoundly impact us? Absolutely, but we must not chase that impact. It’s not about us. It is the same in marriage and every relationship of true love. Am I blessed by my wife when she returns my love? Profoundly. But my personal experience of her should not be my goal, should not be my focus. When it becomes so, then my love is self-centered and full of expectation ... and expectation is a great killer of love and worship (Proverbs 11:23). When driven by earthly expectations, worship is destined to fail (as all human expectations eventually do). The only healthy expectations are those we place on God, and then only for the things that He has promised. Expectations! Yet another great study for another time. If George asks me now, I might have it ready by Easter. ☺

- Pastor Matt

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<sup>1</sup>What We Believe. Bethel Church. <https://www.bethel.com/about/> - accessed Nov 23, 2021