

Philosophy of Singing in Public Worship at GBC

“Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.” - Andrew Fletcher

The quotation above speaks to the potency of music in its ability to shape a nation. Music has the ability to surpass law, politics, and policy. A similar case could be made for the soul-shaping role of music in the spiritual and theological life of a church.

Every church has a liturgy (an order or pattern they follow)—even the most non-traditional, seeker-friendly, and trendy churches have a habitual order by which they conduct their services. Yes, even “non-liturgical” churches that constantly vary their plans have a liturgy - aimlessness and disorder becomes the liturgy there.

A liturgy trains a congregation by habit and repetition what to think about, what to feel, and how to act. A church that over-emphasizes the “mood” or “feel” of the atmosphere can unwittingly train its people to care more about the “vibe” of a song rather than its theological significance.

Evaluation of Worship Songs

Not all “Christian songs” make good worship songs. We live in an era where there is more worship music available to churches than ever before in church history which means that selecting a church’s ‘liturgy’ requires more discernment than ever before. Much of today’s popular worship music has become trendy, shallow, and bereft of theological content that can engage both head and heart.

So, what makes a good worship song for a church service? Some songs are easy to sing but contain lyrics that have poor theology. Other songs are easily learned and contain good theology but are poorly written either musically or lyrically. Still other songs have solid theology and are beautifully written but are practically too difficult to sing in a congregational setting.

The classical transcendentals of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty provide a framework for evaluation of Worship Music.

Truth | Sound theology and precision of language which stimulates deeper understanding

Language shapes our understanding of anything. Let us prioritize Scriptural language whenever possible. Singing Psalms and other songs taken directly from the language of scripture is preferable: Consider the lyrics of “Rejoice” which is from Philippians 4: *“Rejoice in the Lord now and always; Sing it again, we rejoice; Delight in the love he has shown us, Gratefully lift up your voice...”*

Other songs put together theological truths found throughout the Bible, such as these lyrics about God’s sovereignty in the midst of evil: *“This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”* If you could sing your worship set to Buddha, Allah, or even as a love song to a person, then it likely does not contain enough truth to engage the mind to think about God and His attributes.

Goodness | A singable melody that encourages participation with a priority for tradition over trendiness

Something is good if it fulfills its purpose. A good worship song, therefore, will encourage people to sing by its simplicity, timelessness, and orderliness. Technical complexity of music is not wrong, but a congregation must be trained musically over time to sing such songs. (It would take a great deal of time and teaching to make the “Hallelujah Chorus” a Sunday morning standard.) Songs with too much variation become unpredictable and discourage participation. Patterns help to put the mind at ease about where the song is going and thereby encourages people to sing.

Most things do not stand up to the test of time. Most popular things do not have the ability to stick around for more than a year or two. Excellence is therefore a rare quality because it means that it has outlasted many other things. If something has withstood the devouring mouth of time, then it is worth paying attention to. The songs of historic Christianity come down to us through time. A church that wishes to keep passing on the faith to the next generation must also sing the songs it has inherited from the past.

At the same time, we must be aware of the reality that styles change over time, and that there is no one style prescribed by Scripture (that is why there are no notes or beats or time-signatures that have survived with the book of Psalms – just the words). So, while we prioritize what is time-tested, we can intentionally worship through both the “familiar” and the “fresh.” A church that only sings songs that came out in the past few years is by default teaching its people not to pay attention to tradition and a faith rooted in history. And a church that doesn’t sing any songs written in the past few years misses the biblical mark of “singing to the Lord a new song” (Ps. 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1, Isa. 42:10; Rev. 5:9, 14:3).

Beauty | A congruence of word and melody that conforms to standards of beauty and stirs the affections

A beautiful song appeals to the affections as it brings together truth and goodness in a way that is emotionally stirring and fits what is being sung. (Ex. Think about the melody of the following line from “It is well with my Soul”: *My sin not in part, but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more—Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, oh my soul!* There is great triumph and victory expressed both in the lyric and the melody. Another example is the medieval hymn “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”: *What Thou My Lord has suffered, ‘Twas all for sinner’s gain; Mine, mine was the transgression; but Thine the deadly pain.* The somber and weighty scene of crucifixion is captured both by the piercing lyric and the haunting melody.

Beauty, for the Christian, is not merely *in the eye of the beholder*. There are standards for beautiful music that transcend personal preference. This is where tradition (the opinions of others throughout the ages) can help guide us. Every song that the church has sung has been new at some point. New songs are not necessarily bad, but simply untested – which is why we should use them tentatively and cautiously until we see how they stand up to time.

Beauty most impacts our affections. A true/good/beautiful worship song must impact the affections as well as the mind. Truth and goodness set the parameters so that the heart can be moved to overflow in worship. I believe this is what Jesus meant when he said to worship *in spirit and in truth*. Let us become the kind of worshippers the Father seeks (John 4:23) as we lead the church in singing.