

Selecting Hymns, Psalms and Spiritual Songs: The Stewardship of Congregational Worship

“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”¹

In recent months, I have had numerous conversations with pastors, both national and international, on the topic of selecting songs for corporate worship. Regardless of culture, church tradition or denominational association, the common thread is many who attend church worship services are clueless as to the biblical purpose of the corporate gathering. Symptoms to this problem are numerous but the root of the problem is a universal lack of understanding biblical worship and this understanding is evident in attitudes toward songs used during the time of corporate worship.

In His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus mandated that true worship directed to the Father **must** be done “in spirit and truth.” To worship God *in spirit* means worship is an overflow of the human spirit and heart and is not conformed to ceremonies, rituals, traditions or pop-culture, but rather resonates from a redeemed and thankful heart (Colossians 3: 1-17). The worship of God *in truth* is that this heart worship is to be consistent with what Scripture teaches regarding God and His character and Christ as the incarnate Word and the source of redemption for believers. True worship in this sense, goes beyond style, liturgy, tradition, sentimental value, or preferences thereof, rather it emanates from the spirit of the worshiper whose worship is consistent with the truth God has revealed about Himself in Scripture. Upon this foundation, pastors and their worship leaders carefully select the songs to be used in corporate worship.

It has been said that songs and music used in worship services reflect the theology of that particular church. This reflection of theology is not an issue of musical style or instrumentation but rather the textual accuracy in reflecting biblical truth. Too often in our culture, musical experience takes precedent over biblical truth. Songs used in worship services need to clearly state who God is and what He has done, and who we are and how we relate to Him.²

In answering the question, “Does God care how we worship?”, Ligon Duncan states, “God’s word itself must supply the principles and patterns and content of Christian worship. True Christian worship is by the book. It is according to Scripture. The Bible alone ultimately directs the form and content of Christian worship.”³ Songs of worship need to praise the God of the Bible and strengthen

Scott Burdett
“Selecting Worship Songs”
May 2007

and edify the body in its faith and unity in the Gospel. When this is the case, lyrics will be faithful in Biblical content, accurately reflect biblical attitudes, and give clarity as to Who is being worshipped. Therefore, the text of the song is of foremost importance in selecting a song to be used in corporate worship, regardless of its classification, hymn, chorus, or some other musical genre.

Though secondary, musical attributes do play a role in the selection of congregational worship songs. This area is somewhat subjective, and often the abilities and availability of church musicians play a role in selecting such songs. Bob Kauflin, Worship Pastor at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, offers practical suggestions in the selection of congregational worship songs:⁴

1. Choose songs in which the melody is in a comfortable range;
2. Choose songs in which the melody is teachable in one meeting;
3. Choose songs in which the melody is memorable; and lastly,
4. Choose songs in which the melody and accompaniment is complimentary to the text.

In addition, theme and direction of the service, key signatures, tempo, and other musical elements can be a factor in the selection of songs for a particular service. Consider the transition from one song to the next as well as the lyrical progression. For instance, one could begin a service with a song of objective biblical truth that will flow into a response of faith that is a little more subjective in content. Other non-musical considerations such as a prayer, communion, and Scripture reading will often help determine the songs surrounding these elements of worship.

The planning of the worship service requires time, prayer, and musical and spiritual preparation of church musicians. As the Old Testament had requirement for the training and setting aside of musicians in the worship leading responsibilities of that day, pastors of today need to seek out skillful musicians within their churches and see that they are spiritually and musically qualified to lead God-honoring worship within our churches (1 Chronicles 15:22, 23:3-5; 25:6-8; 2 Chronicles 34:12; Numbers 8:24-26; Deuteronomy 14:27-29; 1 Chronicles 9:33; Nehemiah 10:39; 12:27, 47).

Despite all that has been written regarding corporate worship, there will always be a need to continue teaching the church about worship. In some form or fashion, focus on worship style, tradition, sentimentalism, and personal preferences will always compete with true biblical worship. In other words, worship, or some element thereof, is the object of worship rather than the God of worship. Michael Horton states it in this manner, “praise...becomes an end in

Scott Burdett
“Selecting Worship Songs”
May 2007

itself, and we are caught up with our own “worship experience” rather than the God whose character and acts are the only proper focus.”⁵

When our worship focus is direct on something other than God, it is idolatry, and my concern is that this is wide spread within the church, regardless of generation, church tradition or denominational persuasion. Simply, when the heart of the worshiper is far from God, then our worship is mere noise to His ears (Isaiah 29:13; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8).

Spurgeon had the same concern in his day:

“Many may be met with who know God, but never glorify him as God, because they never adore him, and worship him, with the love of their hearts. They go to church or to some place of worship regularly, and sing psalms and hymns, and they may even have family-prayer at home; but their heart has never adored the living God with living love...The name and service of God are much on their tongues, but they do not delight in him, they do not hunger and thirst after him, they do not find prayer and praise to be their very element, but such service as they render is merely lip-service, the unwilling homage of bond-slaves, and not the delighted service of those who are the children of God.”⁶

We were created and redeemed to worship God and worship will be our eternal duty in Heaven. So as Paul exhorted the elders at the Church in Ephesus in caring for the flock (Acts 20:28), it is the responsibility of pastors to care for the flock in all areas of spiritual health, including worship. May we as pastors cherish and hold dearly the stewardship of congregational worship that God has entrusted us.

Scott Burdett
May 2007

¹ John 4: 23,24 - English Standard Version

² Bob Kauflin, “Choosing Songs Wisely”, Sovereign Grace 2004 WorshipGOD Conference.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, et al., Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishers, 2003), 20.

⁴ Bob Kauflin, “Choosing Songs Wisely,” Sovereign Grace 2004 WorshipGOD Conference.

⁵ Michael Horton, A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship (Baker Books, 2003) 26.

⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Knowledge. Worship. Gratitude”, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/1763.htm>

Scott Burdett
“Selecting Worship Songs”
May 2007