

Music in Worship – Lesson 13

Evaluating Songs

- Last week we began looking at a method for determining which songs are of the highest quality – comparison of various denominations’ hymnals to determine which songs were most represented. But that method is purely descriptive; it only tells us what value the Church places on a song that is already of sufficient age to be included in the majority of hymnals. It does not tell us anything about newer songs.
- We can however, look at the list of the best songs from last week and use that list to determine common qualities of the best songs. The resulting list of qualities can then be used to grade or rank other songs. This gives us a more objective and prescriptive approach to evaluating songs.
- We might ask the question “why do we need to evaluate songs?” Let me present you with a scenario that will be helpful in answering our question.
 - A new believer comes to you and asks “Hey, I’m struggling with understanding contentment. Can you help me?” You respond with “Well, Paul talks about contentment in Phil 4 and in verse 19 says ‘my God shall supply all your needs.’ So the way I like to think about it is that contentment is having everything I need. Once I have everything I need, then I can be content.”
 - What do you think of that answer?
- So back to our question “why do we need to evaluate songs?”
- Recall that the primary purposes of corporate worship music are to give glory to God and to instruct and admonish fellow believers. For both these purposes, we should recoil from anything other than at least trying to do our best; we should not glorify God with mediocre praise and we ought not teach other believers with doctrine that is sort-of true as in the example we just saw.
- Therefore, we need to attempt to make sure our songs give the highest quality praise to God and communicate the clearest, most accurate doctrine to those around us. We cannot make that attempt if we do not have an objective method for evaluating individual songs.
- Dr. Breed examined the list of thirty two “best hymns” and finds three common qualities that are true of all thirty two.
 - “[A true hymn] must be Scriptural, both in sentiment and expression.”
 - “The true hymn must be devotional.”
 - “The true hymn must be lyrical.”
- Let us examine each of these qualities individually.
- “[A true hymn] must be Scriptural, both in sentiment and expression.”
 - As in our example scenario, it is not enough in a song simply to quote Scripture or to be able to say that the song uses the same language as the Bible or as various passages. The most prominent heresies all appeal to Scripture but they fail to maintain the its sentiment even as they use the expressions of Scripture.
 - The best songs then express Scriptural truth but they also maintain the balance of truth that Scripture maintains.
 - For instance, Jesus said “the Father is greater than I.” That statement is Biblical truth. But it is inconsistent with Scripture to say that the Son is not equal with the Father. It must be balanced with everything else that is in Scripture.
- “The true hymn must be devotional.”
 - Breed says “true devotion contemplates God in the various relations which he sustains towards his earthly creatures. The true hymn must therefore have a motion Godward.

- To be Godward in its motion means that a song directs the thoughts towards God, even if God is not addressed in that song.
- “The true hymn must tend toward God; bring him to mind; exalt his name and seek his glory. Those which are simply introspective, didactic, dogmatic, sentimental, egotistical, and the like, are not [true] hymns.”
 - Sentimental – “resulting from feeling rather than reason or thought”
- Another author states this qualification as “it must be an objective expression of praise to God and thus devotional in the purest sense.”
- “The true hymn must be lyrical.”
 - This is not simply to say that the words are to be set to music. The message of the song must be improved by singing it. “There must be, indeed, an interaction between the words and the music that is harmonious and reciprocal. The tune must be a help to the [words] and the [words] a help to the tune, else either tune or [words] are at fault—perhaps both.”
 - While he may mean more, Breed at least is saying that the tune needs to match the words. If the words and tune are not in agreement, or worse, at odds, the resulting song is damaged and cannot be a great song.
 - Examples: “At Calvary” (278) & “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (208)
- Let’s evaluate some songs using these three requirements.
- Open to #507 in the hymnal
 - Do the words and tune match? Are the words improved by singing them?
 - I think the tune does match the words fairly well. It does seem that the words are improved by singing them; simply speaking them lacks power or emotion.
 - Is the song devotional, an objective expression of praise? Are our thoughts directed toward God?
 - While there is something of a Godward direction to this song, there is an equally strong (or stronger) motion towards self. The song is also strongly sentimental and subjective. What is it even saying?
 - Is the song Scriptural in both sentiment and expression? Is it truthful?
 - There are two ways to interpret this song: as an expression of an individual believer’s fellowship with Christ or as a poetic telling of Mary Magdalene being surprised by the risen Christ. In neither interpretation can this song said to be Scriptural.
 - There is little sense to be made out of the verses if they are expressions of a believer’s fellowship; if the words are taken literally, it is obvious they cannot be correct. If they are taken poetically or symbolically, they can mean almost anything; there is nothing in the song to guide our understanding. And a song that can mean anything cannot be truthful.
 - Taken as the expression of a believer, the refrain certainly is incorrect; no believer can legitimately claim to share a joy with Christ that is unknown to all other believers.
 - If we take the song as speaking of Mary Magdalene, it is still not Scriptural.
 - Mary probably was not alone with Jesus (Matt 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8 Luke 24:1-12). Jesus’ voice did not have a special quality to it (Jn 20:15).
 - Mary did not stay in the garden until nightfall but was with Jesus for only a few minutes and there is no Scriptural indication that Mary walked and talked with Jesus in the garden beyond the brief exchange at the tomb (Jn 20:17).
 - “In the Garden” fails 2 of the 3 qualifications and so cannot be said to be a great song. It has serious flaws in that it is not true to Scriptural and therefore should not be used in worship.
- Open to #43 in the hymnal

- Do the words and tune match? Are the words improved by singing them?
 - Both words and tune are energetic and unashamed. The tune is suited for words that are a public call to rejoice. The words do seem to be improved by setting them to music. While they are decent poetry, they lack the emphasis the song gives.
- Is the song devotional, an objective expression of praise? Are our thoughts directed toward God?
 - While the entire song is directed from one believer to another, the entire basis for the song is the reality of God and his work. Every stanza calls on us to rejoice because of some aspect of God or what he has done. God is the reason we rejoice!
- Is the song Scriptural in both sentiment and expression? Is it truthful?
 - Unlike “In the Garden,” we are not left wondering how we are to understand these words. They are straightforward and clear.
 - The words are also truthful and Scriptural. The Lord is King! We are to adore (worship) our Lord and King and we are told to do so with singing. Jesus is the Savior and he is reigning and seated above (Acts 2:32-36). Christ’s kingdom is unfailing, unshakable (Heb 12:25-28), he does rule everything (Ps 10:16, Rev 17:14), and he has been given the keys of death and hell (Rev 1:18). Finally, Christ, the Judge (John 5:22-23), is coming again and will take his servants to be with him forever (1 Thess 4:16-17).
- “Rejoice, the Lord is King” meets all three criteria. It is can safely be called one of the best hymns.