

choosing songs wisely

2. Then consider the music

- **Is it singable?**
 - Is the range of the melody comfortable (low A to high D)?
 - Is there too much syncopation? A heavily syncopated tune will be difficult to catch on to and may leave people disengaged.
 - Is the melody interesting without being too complex and ornate for people to get?
 - Is the melody good?!⁸ Is it engaging, dynamic and exciting? Does it rise when you want it to? Is there a strong melodic hook? Does it inspire?
- **Does the music complement the lyrics?**
 - Does the music serve the lyrics and subject of the song or is it distracting? We want people to be inspired by truth and for the music to aid in that, not merely for people to be caught up in a driving rhythm and engaging riffs.

3. Rate the song

In light of the above, in which of these categories would you place the song:

1. **We shouldn't use this song**
2. **I could use personally** (maybe there are lyrics that could be open to misunderstanding that I'm aware of but might prove unhelpful to others)
3. **We could use in congregational worship**
4. **We should use this song congregationally**

While we try to pare down His song down to a manageable repertoire, He is expanding it. While we are doing market research to decide whom we want to reach and, therefore, to whose aesthetic tastes we want to pander, the Singing Saviour is distributing His magnificent voice across an increasingly wide spectrum of musical idioms. While we are dividing congregations along age lines, He is blending the songs of generations and nations and families and tribe and tongues to make sweet harmony, precisely through the differences, to his Father.⁹

NOTES

¹ AW Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

² John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*

³ Nick Page, *And now let's move into a time of nonsense*

⁴ Douglas Moo, *Informed Worship*,

⁵ Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*

⁶ *Colossians*, 3:16

⁷ John Wimber, *Songs of Vineyard*

⁸ For a useful and accessible introduction to assessing quality melodies see the chapter 'Music that Moves' (pp39-57) in *Sing a New Song* by David Montgomery

⁹ Reggie Kidd, *Bach, Bubba, and the Blues Brothers*

Some quotations

'Worship is pure or base, as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.'¹

'The worship of God is evoked, informed and inspired by the vision of God ... True knowledge of God will always lead us to worship.'²

'The words of worship songs matter. They convey truth – the truth to which we are supposed to respond. They aren't just sounds to enable us to join in the melody. They are the means by which the mind understands what God has done for us ... Banal, meaningless lyrics, badly crafted and expressed in confusing language, will not lead us into the deep worship that our world and church need to see.'³

'Worship of God should always involve the emotions; how can we praise a holy God who has redeemed us without getting emotional about it? But what should move our emotions is not the sonorous tones of the organ or the insistent beat of the drums, but the mind's apprehension of truth about God.'⁴

The ... worship leaders of today play an enormous part in shaping the faith and life of the church tomorrow. This is an awesome responsibility. Those who shape worship are the de facto theologians of the church, whether they want to be or not ... The songs you choose, the Scriptures that you read, the prayers that you pray and the way you connect them all together make a vast difference.'⁵

'Let the word of God dwell in you richly as you sing.'⁶

What do you think of the views expressed in these quotations? How important are the songs we, as worship leaders, choose to sing? If they matter, why do they matter? What effect can they have on those who sing (or listen to) them? How important is it for us to make informed and considered choices when picking songs for congregational worship? Is this being overly analytical?

Does any of this sound familiar...?

No less a figure than Graham Kendrick has facetiously suggested the following list of reasons why some people might choose certain songs.

1. I'm really into Sonic Boom's latest CD and these are my favourite tracks.
2. This song seemed to really click with people last time.
3. These are the only ones the band can do and we can't practice this week.
4. I'm bored with that song – we've played it too much recently.
5. I know song this song has great theology in it, but it has too many words, and I'm into simple right now.
6. I really like the way my voice sounds on this song.
7. This is the latest song that God gave me. Hope you like it. He does.

Some underlying principles for choosing songs

• **Songs teach...**

Col 3:16 says '...let the word of God dwell in you richly as you sing...' Throughout scripture and church history, songs have been used to convey truths about God and us. But songs don't only *declare* truth, they are a means for that truth to be *embedded deeply* into our hearts and minds. The words we place into people's mouths through the songs we sing have a life and significance that we dare not ignore. Our songs not only *reflect* a theology of how we should relate to God, they *shape* it. They exercise a formative power in our understanding of God.

• **...whether we expect them to or not!**

Not everyone would agree with the idea that songs teach. In fact, John Wimber has said, 'These are not songs *about* Jesus, they are songs *to* Jesus: intimate and personal.'⁷ But I don't think we can make such a neat distinction between the functions of songs. Even songs of *expression* (ie those stating our love for God) create an *impression*. In other words, the very language the songs use to express our relationship with Christ teaches us things about the nature of that relationship.

• **A healthy song diet will have breadth and depth**

Scripture is diverse in the themes it covers; life is diverse in the circumstances and experiences we encounter. What of our song diet? Do we have songs that cover a wide range of themes and life experiences? What about mission; the persecuted church; the unity in diversity of the body of Christ; lament; repentance; the justice of God?

As for depth, are we giving people truths stated in a way profound enough to help them as they face the challenges of life? Do our songs articulate the objective truths about God as a foundation for our subjective experience of God? For someone experiencing fear and uncertainty, what would be the difference for them if we were to sing '*Over the mountains and the sea/Your river runs with love for me*' as opposed to '*No guilt in life, no fear in death/This is the power of Christ in me/ From life's first cry, to final breath/Jesus commands my destiny*'. There is of course a place for simple expressions of truth, but simplicity is not the same as shallowness or vagueness.

We need ... worship songs that have sprung from deep meditation ... A worship song should have depth. It's not a superficial high, intended for instant consumption and then disposed of. It is – or should be – an offering to God.

Nick Page

Musical breadth is good too. A diversity of styles reflects the unity in diversity of the people of God united by the gospel as well as giving as wide a

voice possible to the express the multi-faceted nature of God whose character cannot be contained within one musical style.

Practical pointers to help assess individual songs

1. First considering the lyrics

• **Do the lyrics reflect biblical truth accurately?**

- Is the theology expressed correct? Is the picture of God and/or humanity that is painted true to scripture?
- Theologically accurate songs do not have to be weighty, content heavy songs; but even a simpler song must not contradict the truth of scripture.
- Do the lyrics reflect the emphasis of scripture? For example, what potential misunderstandings might the line '*like a rose, trampled on the ground*' present? What image does this present? Is it biblical to suggest that Jesus was a helpless victim (cf. John 19:11)? Does this simile convey that? Does it matter that is a *possible* interpretation?

• **Are the lyrics clear?**

- The clarity and objective meaning of the songs matter. How do people interpret words like: '*Did you feel the mountains tremble ... when the people rose to sing of Jesus Christ the risen one*'? What is affecting people in this lyric: a deep truth from scripture, or the emotional impact of exciting sounding words to a driving beat?
- What metaphors and imagery are being used? Are they good poetry or do they just unnecessarily obscure the truth? (For an example of how to use simile powerfully to illustrate a point, check out Jeremiah 17:-5-8)

The idea of a servant-lyric is not a fashionable one. We are in an artistic culture which promotes the 'master-lyric'. Much modern art and culture is deliberately confusing, opaque or subjective, expressed in a language that only the artist truly understands. And if we the public don't understand ... well, then that's our fault. We're just not artistic enough. We must not allow this attitude to seep into the worship song.

Nick Page

• **Are the lyrics fresh and written in accessible language?**

- Good new songs will tell the same old truths in new ways. Do the lyrics have an interesting turn of phrase, or an engaging metaphor, or fresh angle on a theme to help give a new perspective on God?
- Are the lyrics full of religious sounding clichés that actually don't really connect with people? Are they in accessible, relevant language?

• **Is this song adding variety to our song repertoire or simply repeating themes already covered?**

- This is not to say that we can't have new songs covering old themes sung in fresh ways, but it's merely to get us to consider using the introduction of new songs to expand the topics of songs we sing about.
- What topic areas do you think we're deficient on at the moment? In what subject areas do we need to be actively looking for songs?

As worship leaders, we need to widen our 'song vocabulary' to include songs for every biblical theme and every walk of life.

Matt Redman