

THE SONGS WE SING AT MISSION CITY BIBLE CHURCH

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this position paper is to provide a rationale for how we choose the songs we sing at Mission City Bible Church. It will provide a high-level philosophy of worship and demonstrate our guiding principles to help people understand why our Sunday mornings look and sound the way they do. We will also lay out a few critiques that have recently been coming up against singing songs from controversial sources and issue our response.

OVERVIEW OF WORSHIP AT MISSION CITY

The Bible speaks about worship using a variety of words and refers to a variety of concepts. It is helpful to distill these words and concepts into two categories; individual worship and corporate worship. Individual worship is living your life in a way that is pleasing to the Lord (Romans 12:1-2, Colossians 3:17). Gathered worship refers to the corporate activity done by the church when it assembles (Acts 2:42). We believe that the Bible determines what ought to be done in the corporate worship of the church as we read what is prescribed and implied in the New Testament. This includes things like the preaching of the word, the administration of the ordinances, prayer, and singing (Acts 6:4, 1 Corinthians 14:26, Hebrews 10:25). One of the things we know for certain is that the Old Testament and New Testament are full of references commanding the people of God to sing (Exodus 15, Psalm 96 & 149, Luke 2:46, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, Revelation 4)! So how and what exactly are the people of God supposed to sing?

The design of liturgy (order of worship) has been a defining characteristic of various traditions and denominations. Some church traditions are formal-liturgical (following the same order of service every week based on a yearly calendar), and some are non-liturgical (allowing variance to the service order from week to week). While Scripture has given us elements of our worship that must be included, it has not prescribed an exact order or proportion for the gathering, leaving those decisions up to individual churches based on wisdom, culture, and tradition. For those reasons, we adhere to an ordered non-liturgical practice for our worship services.

That being said, we believe that the Sunday service as a whole tells a story. Liturgy is intended to communicate something. All of the elements of a service; the call to worship, the singing, the sermon, the ordinances all come together to make something beautiful as a whole. It is important to evaluate the individual parts and how it relates to the whole. Planning services that tell a compelling biblical story requires intentionality. And while the Bible has not been prescriptive about how this is done, there are numerous biblically informed methods employed by different movements throughout church history.

We believe that one of the repeating themes in Scripture is revelation leading to response. Throughout Scripture people have an encounter with God (revelation) and they immediately fall to their knees in worship (response) (Exodus 34:4-9, Isaiah 6:1-4, John 4:14-24, Revelation 4-5).

When there is a glimpse of who God is, the response of the human heart is to cry out “Holy, Holy, Holy”. From Genesis to Revelation, this is the pattern.

So if the climactic song of heaven is the holiness of God, then we want the climax of our corporate gathering to be focused on the holiness of God. We want the eyes of our people to be drawn up to who God is and what he has done for us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This happens in aspects of every element of our services but we try to be especially intentional in how we put songs together to create a pathway to help people see the transcendence of God.

We do this by categorizing our songs by their lyrical content into five categories. The categories include: gathering songs, thanksgiving songs, testimony songs, heart preparation songs, and ascription songs.¹ Another picture of this in the Bible is the temple worship as the people moved from the outer gates towards the holy of holies which was restricted to only the high priest once a year (Leviticus 16). Now we worship as the new covenant people who have access to God through Christ, any place and any time we desire! These categories help us tell a compelling story through our liturgy to help people understand the gospel which shines a spotlight on the holiness of God.

There is much more that could be said on this, but our desire here is to communicate the intentionality of planning that goes into the services at Mission City. We do not believe this is the only way but it is a biblical way to approach service planning. This explains how services are designed, but another question worth asking is how are the individual songs chosen? We will now shift to focus on how we determine the songs we sing.

THE SONGS WE SING

Hundreds of thousands of songs could be sung on any given Sunday, so what are the guiding principles that help us determine what songs we should sing? Four primary filters help us make informed decisions about such matters.²

1. Is It True?

It seems like an obvious place to start to say that what we sing as a church must be true! The lyrics of the songs we sing reflect the doctrine and teaching of our church. With every song that we choose, we must be able to make a biblical defence for the claims found in each song. Sometimes songs say things that are true but unclear.

We want to sing songs that are clear in what they are saying so that we can have a clear biblical rationale for each line. While we must be charitable in allowing songs to be poetic and cannot expect them to say “everything about everything”. Nevertheless, we uphold a high standard of truth and clarity in the songs that we sing.

¹ These categories are simply a tool to help us, there are other types of songs employed within them such as lament.

² This section was largely helped by Bob Kauflin and his various posts at WorshipMatters.com



2. Is It Biblically Saturated?

A song can be true without saying much of anything. If the songs we sing function as a spiritual meal for our people, we want to ensure that there are rich, biblically saturated songs that provide a certain depth to our corporate worship that allows people to “eat well”. We do not require all songs to function the same way in our service, but we desire the songs we sing to be saturated with biblical truth that helps us understand who God is in a way that is clear and beautiful.

3. Is It Singable?

This is the first musical point on the list. Songs are both lyric and melody and both matter greatly! Corporate worship ought to be a unifying and edifying experience as we encourage one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. This requires that the melodies of the songs we use can be sung by the musically gifted and the not-so-musically gifted. We think very carefully about whether or not the people can follow along with the melody and phrasing of the songs that we choose. If you think about the songs that have stood the test of time, one of the defining features is melody and lyric working together in a way that is singable and memorable.

4. Is It Good?

We acknowledge this involves taste and preference but some could (and many do) write songs that are true, biblically saturated, and singable that no one wants to sing. We believe that there is a level of objectivity within the arts to say something can be good or bad. And we want to choose songs that are beautiful in lyric, melody, and composition. While we acknowledge not everyone has the same tastes and preferences, we are making decisions about the songs we sing through a filter of what we think are good songs that will bless our church.

WHAT ABOUT STYLE?

One of the things you might notice is that the list doesn’t require a certain genre or style of music. Some of the great hymns that have stood the test of time check all of the aforementioned boxes, and so do many new songs that we have chosen. One of the areas of conversation around this topic that is discussed with great fervour is the involvement or prioritization of hymns. While we embrace many hymns that fulfill the requirements listed above, we do not treat them differently than any other song. We acknowledge that there is a blessing that comes with the familiarity and the fact that they have stood the test of time, but we do not hold them as more sacred than any other song.

We also want to be clear that we embrace a modern expression of music at Mission City. Though from time to time we will employ a different genre or style, we are intentionally aiming at a modern expression of musical worship.³

We believe that the music of the church ought to be in the language of the people. The style that we have chosen is to help the most amount of people engage with the songs in our worship time.

³ Modern and contemporary are interchangeable but are different from the idea of genre and style. There are modern expressions of hymns. And there are dated expressions of new songs. We also want to embrace a variety of genres from Christian contemporary music, southern gospel, black gospel, modern praise and worship, singer-songwriter... etc.

WHERE DO WE GET OUR SONGS FROM?

In recent years there has been a large amount of focus given to the sources of the songs we sing. The heart of the matter revolves around whether we should be singing songs from people with different theological convictions. We will briefly look at two aspects of this source argument and then present the position our church holds.

1. The Shepherding Argument

This argument goes like this... Source X and Source Y have different beliefs than our church on key doctrines that some consider dangerous and even heretical. Songs are an extension of the teaching and doctrine of the church. By singing songs from Source X or Source Y, we are providing a stamp of approval on their teaching and ministry as a whole. The songs we have sung in our church then become a gateway into dangerous false teaching. Therefore we shouldn't sing songs from Source X or Source Y.

To this line of argument, we have three responses. First is an outright rejection of the third premise. We do not believe that by singing a song from any source we are affirming everything that has ever been said by that source. That would be an impossible standard to uphold. If we are singing a song from a source we are saying this particular song is true and meets the requirements of the list above.

Second, that standard is rarely applied to the hymns we sing. Often the sentiment "ignorance is bliss" applies to the sources of the hymns we sing, while "scrutiny is required" is the standard for new songs. Many of the hymn writers were deeply flawed characters with vastly different theological convictions than our church holds.⁴ We cannot employ that standard consistently but if we did, we would see a lot of beloved songs dismissed.

Third, what is considered a "good" source? It is difficult to discern what level of doctrinal agreement is required for this standard. Do we need to agree on both primary and secondary issues? What do we do if there is doctrinal alignment but the author has a moral failure? We do not sing songs because of the goodness of the source, but because of the goodness of God the song is pointing to. This argument breaks down practically and therefore we do not employ this standard in its rigid form. We believe that a song is to be evaluated on its own merit.

2. The Financial Argument

This argument goes like this... Source X and Source Y are heretical movements. When you sing songs from Source X or Source Y, you are financially supporting a heretical movement. Therefore we shouldn't sing songs from Source X or Source Y.

There are three responses we will look at to this argument. First, there is a movement of co-writing that mixes "good" sources with "bad" sources.⁵ The vast majority of songs being written today have at least 2-5 different songwriters on them, often from different theological backgrounds. This has led to multiple versions of songs being released by different artists. The

⁴ See Horatio Spafford, Charles Wesley, Martin Luther... etc

⁵ "Good" meaning shared doctrinal alignment and "bad" meaning vast theological misalignment.

purpose of this response is to demonstrate that it is hard to maintain this standard in an environment where there is so much diversity of background on any given song.

Second, the word heresy often gets used too loosely in these conversations. Often the sources people are calling heretical are sources that have vastly different theological convictions than us but would uphold the first-order doctrines that define our faith.⁶ While we may not advise people to go to these churches, singing a song that they were a part of doesn't mean we are funding a "heretical" movement.

Third, this standard is unable to be applied to other areas consistently. Do we require total economic separation in the church? What about the coffee we buy, the contractors we hire, and the publishing companies of the books we stock in our bookstore? We cannot channel our money to sources that align with us perfectly thus causing the financial argument to not be persuasive.

In summary of these arguments, we do not believe that abstaining from sources that don't align with us doctrinally is required. Rather we choose to operate out of a principle of wisdom to say we will choose songs that we believe are helpful to our people. At times there are events that lead people to think more about the source than the song causing them to struggle to engage in worship. We maintain the right to refrain from singing certain sources at certain times that would cause people to stumble. However, we do not want the songs we don't sing to become a defining feature of our ministry. Rather, we want our worship to be a unifying expression where our brothers and sisters in the Lord are encouraged as we make much of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

We hope this paper has clearly demonstrated how we think about the corporate worship that takes place on Sunday mornings. We believe that Scripture informs every practice that we do to the extent that it can. Where Scripture has not been directly prescriptive, we aim to let principles of wisdom guide us. We also desire for this paper to lead us toward greater unity in our church. The Church has been battling with issues of preference regarding how services are done since its inception. And while we are certainly imperfect, we desire to be intentional, and we encourage any conversations on matters of such preferences to be done with grace, humility, and understanding. The expression of unity within the body of Christ is in itself an act of worship to God and we pray we would collectively choose to make that our aim!

⁶ See Albert Mohler's article "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity".