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TEN PRINCIPLES FOR CHURCH SONG (PART 1)

June 28, 2011

58 Comments **746**

When it comes to singing on Sundays, churches have more options than ever before. From hymnals to Hillsong to homegrown creations, pastors and worship leaders have thousands of songs to choose from. A nice problem to have.

But still a problem. No music leader or pastor can keep up. No church can sing all the great hymns and all the latest greatest songs on the radio. No musician can excel in all the available styles. No leader can please all the people all the time.

The proliferation of choices often leads to conflict. Should we do hymns (Wesley, Watts, or Fanny Crosby?) or contemporary (70's folk music, early seeker service contemporary, or edgy punk rock?). Should our music have a Latin flavor or an African American feel? Should we use chants, chorale music, metrical psalms, jazz, country western, or bluegrass?

There are other questions too. What sort of instruments should we use? How much should cultural context come into play? Is there only one right

kind of song to sing? If not, are there any wrong ways?

I can't possibly answer all those questions. But there are some general principles we can use to make wise decisions with our church music. Let me suggest ten principles for congregational singing.

1. Love is indispensable to church singing that pleases God.

There are more important things than the kinds of songs we sing. Music should not be the glue that holds us together—the cross, the glory of Jesus Christ, the majesty of God, and love should. But even churches centered on the gospel disagree about music. So love is indispensable when we sing and when we are trying to discern what is best to sing.

John Calvin:

But because he [the Lord] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe. (Inst (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1598561685/deyorestandre-20>). 4.10.30)

Before we are quick to judge the lame songs some other Christians enjoy, remember C.S. Lewis' revelation. Listen to one of the century's most famous converts to Christianity talk about his early impression of church music:

I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit. (God in the Dock (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0802808689/deyorestandre-20>), 62)

I imagine the Apostle Paul, if he were writing to the church today, might have something to say about our worship style. “If I sing in style of the hippest music, but have not love, I am only a banging drum or a strumming guitar. If I have a gift for reading music and enjoy the richest hymns, but have not love, I am nothing. If I am discerning of excellent music and fine poetry, but have not love, I gain nothing.” The first principle for singing as a congregation and choosing music for the congregation is love.

2. Our singing is for God’s glory and the edification of the body of Christ.

God is the one we want to impress, the one we most want to honor. Our first aim must not be to win over the culture or appeal to the unregenerate. Worship is for the Worthy One.

Following closely on this priority is the goal of edification. The singing on Sunday morning should benefit God’s people. This is a fair application of Paul’s concerns in 1 Corinthians 14. It’s also part and parcel of teaching and admonishing each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16 (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Col.%203.16>)). We should never approach the music as an entertaining lead-in to the sermon. Before you employ secular songs as your background music prior to the start of the service, consider whether a vaguely spiritual song from U2 will really build up the body of Christ.

Congregational song is part of the teaching ministry of the church. Church musicians and pastors should ask themselves: if our people learned their theology from our songs what would they know in twenty years about God, the cross, the resurrection, the offices of Christ, the

Holy Spirit, the Trinity, creation, justification, election, regeneration, the church, the sacraments, and all the other fundamental doctrines of the faith?

3. We ought to sing to the Lord new songs.

Isn't that a command? A command we haven't exhausted yet? There are still new songs to be sung to the Lord. What if the Church had stopped singing new songs in the 15th century? We wouldn't have "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." What if Christians stopped in the 16th century? No Charles Wesley. No Isaac Watts. What if the Church stopped a generation ago? No one would be singing "In Christ Alone" this Sunday. What a pity.

Sometimes I want to ask to very conservative Christians: "Do you really think the last good song of praise to Jesus has been written?"

4. Church singing should swim in its own history of church singing.

The metaphor is intentional. We should swim in this big ocean of church music, a ocean that is continually receiving new streams. I am not advocating a certain percentage of old v. new—every church will look and feel a little different, but I am suggesting that we should understand ourselves to be a part of this deep ocean of Christian song.

It's amazing to me that any church would consciously (or unconsciously for that matter) step completely out of the ocean of the historic hymnody and step into a wading pool of nothing but contemporary song. I'm not saying newer songs are inferior to older ones (see previous point). What I am saying is that it is an expression of extreme hubris and folly to think we have nothing to gain from older songs and nothing to lose when we throw out the songs Christians have been singing for hundreds of years.

Think of what you get with a hymnal (whether it's an actual hymnal or the contents of the hymnal on your screen):

- *A link to history.* Our people, not to mention the world, needs to know that Christianity is not a novel invention. We sing in concert with two millennia of believers.
- *Diversity.* I guarantee that those churches using hymns are being exposed to a wider variety of Christian song than those who are exclusively contemporary. The hymnal has twenty centuries of styles: chants, folk tunes, ethnic tunes, carols, psalms, Welsh ballads, English melodies, stout German hymns, gospel tunes (black and white), and dozens of other musical variations.

- *Excellence.* Yes, there are some real clunkers in most hymnals. But by and large, the bad songs have been weeded out. If we are still singing a song five hundred years later it probably has strong lyrics, good poetry, and a singable tune.
- *The whole counsel of God.* Hymns give you a wide range of themes and biblical categories. Contemporary music is getting better in this regard, but the hymnal is still the best place to find a song on the ascension or the exaltation of Christ or a song of illumination or a lamentation or a communion hymn. Kudos to the Getty/Townend team and Sovereign Grace for trying to fill these kinds of gaps.

5. Sing the Psalms.

I am not convinced by the arguments for exclusive psalmody. But in 95% of our churches the problem is not that we are keeping out good non-Psalms. It's strange, even though we are commanded to sing Psalms and even though Psalms have been at the center of the Church's singing for centuries, still we easily ignore the 800 pound gorilla in the middle of our Bibles (to borrow a phrase from Terry Johnson). On a cheerier note, I'm thankful we are beginning to see some contemporary musicians (<http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2010/08/28/new-parish-psalms/>) turn their attention to the Psalms.

(Go here (<http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2011/06/30/ten-principles-for-church-singing-part-2/>) for Part 2.)

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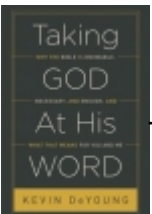
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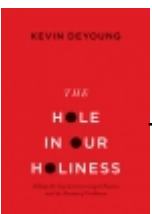
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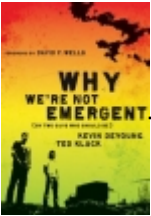
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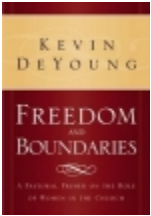
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