

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Worship War – 1:

### Should We Sing *Those* Songs?

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(Unsplash photo)

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following column is Part I of a three-part series. It was published in the current print edition of the Baptist and Reflector. The other two parts, which will be published in upcoming print editions, are available here: [Part II](#) and [Part III](#).

### SHOULD WE SING *THOSE* SONGS?!

Have you heard about the new “worship war”? This one has nothing to do with musical style, what instruments we use, or even lyrical content. Instead, some are debating the suitability of worship music based on a song’s origins. Who wrote the song? Which denomination published it? What artist sings it?

These questions lead to the heart of the matter: Can a worship song be disqualified because of its source, even if the song is biblically accurate? Does a flawed source make a “good song” bad? Lately the questions are even more direct: “Should we sing songs from Bethel and Hillsong? What about Elevation and Jesus Culture?”

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## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

According to CCLI, seven of the top ten modern songs sung in churches today are affiliated with these denominations. The list includes favorites like “Goodness of God,” “Build My Life,” “Living Hope,” and “Graves into Gardens.”

This popularity is alarming for a growing faction within evangelicalism, a group that considers these denominations somewhere on the theological spectrum between peculiar and outright heretical. As a result, any song affiliated with these sources is deemed “off limits.”

Social media and the blogosphere have added fuel to the fire. A debate once confined to theological elites is now fair game at deacons’ meetings, on church social media pages, in discussions among pastoral staff, and even at church business meetings. In fact, whether to sing *those songs* is the theological inquiry I receive most in my role serving Tennessee Baptists.

This article is my response. It’s my attempt to offer my thoughts thoroughly and publicly about this complex and multifaceted issue. I’ll raise the most common objections to singing *those songs*, offer some counter arguments, and even a few *counter-counter* arguments. By delving into this topic, however, I’m not suggesting I’m an expert or even trying to convince you that I’m right. I’ve wrestled with this issue enough to have found myself on *both* sides of the debate, and still, I lack certainty. But when hot-button topics related to worship affect our churches, I want to do my best to help us examine and evaluate these important matters.

## WHAT ARE THE THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS?

Critics of Bethel express concern over “grave soaking,” the practice of “soaking up” the anointing of dead saints by laying on their graves. Others mention their peculiar theology of angels, with heavenly messengers awakened from decades of slumber by crying out, “Wakey, wakey!” Some question the mysterious manifestations of “gold dust,” “angel feathers,” and “glory clouds” in Bethel’s worship services. Perhaps most alarming is their theology of healing—sometimes tied explicitly to the gospel—that claims it’s always God’s will to heal.

A recent documentary, *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed*, offers a piercing critique of Hillsong, describing years of sexual abuse cover-ups, financial misappropriation, and the weaponizing of music to financially benefit the church and expand its worldwide influence.

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Elevation Church's Steven Furtick was rebuked for teaching "God broke his own law" and inferring the ancient heresy of Modalism, a belief that God changes forms (or modes) between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Elevation was also blasted for planting volunteers in the congregation who were coached to come forward "spontaneously" for baptism, in hopes of enticing others to do the same.

## THE ROOT OBJECTION

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**The root objection from critics is that songs from these sources are tainted.** The logic goes something like this: Bethel's pastor and leader, Bill Johnson, is a false teacher. Bethel, therefore, is a false church. Songs from false churches are corrupted and, consequently, should not be sung.

Others disagree. A song's source "does not taint whether or not truth is expressed in the song," suggests Kenny Lamm, Worship Ministries Strategist for the North Carolina Baptist Convention. "If a song is biblical, singing the song would not harm the theology of your church members nor would it infuse them with heresy."

Mike Harland, Associate Pastor of Worship at First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi, and former Director of Lifeway Worship, goes a step further: "All truth is God's truth...If a song is true, then God is the One who made it true."

Even so, can a song's associations render it unusable? If Hitler wrote an incredible, biblically-rich worship hymn, churches wouldn't sing it. Not because the song is stained or polluted; it's superstitious to believe "songs are ... magically holy [or] unholy based on their material associations," suggests Matthew Westerholm. Instead, the song would be avoided because it would be a distraction. Minds would be drawn to the evil Nazi despot rather than the truth of the lyrics.

Ravi Zacharias hits even closer to home. His content is exceptional, but his behavior was horrendous. As a result, some no longer read his books or recommend them to others—not because the truth he wrote is now untruthful, but because his wicked conduct creates a distraction.

Matthew D. Westerholm, Associate Professor of Church Music and Worship at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers wise advice for this dilemma: "A local church can always avoid distracting songs, but avoiding a song ought to occur because of *real* distraction among *actual* people, not some ethereal standard of liturgical purity nor some supposed spiritual taint from an unworthy author."

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We ought to also consider some beloved songs that would be disqualified from our churches if we use the “tainted source” criterion consistently. “It Is Well with My Soul” was written by Horatio Spafford, who eventually rejected a literal hell and embraced universalism. Robert Robinson, who penned the oft-sung “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love” in “Come, Thou Fount” seems to have done just that, denouncing the Trinity late in life. What about “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”? The great reformer Martin Luther was disturbingly anti-Semitic, writing, “set fire to their synagogues or schools” and advising that “rabbis be forbidden to teach on pain of loss of life and limb.”

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## THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

The slippery slope is obvious. Every song, to varying degrees, has a tainted source, because “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” ([Romans 3:23](#)). A local church and its leaders must determine, therefore, how much and what type of taint is tolerable in their context to not create a distraction and hinder their worship. But if churches only sing songs written by perfect Christians with flawless theology and impeccable ethics, we’d have no songs left to sing.

*In Part II, we’ll consider some specific objections to singing those songs. **B&R***



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© Tennessee Baptist and Reflector, February 21, 2023. Retrieved May 5, 2025.

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