Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Worship War – 2:

Should We Sing *Those* Songs?

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(Unsplash photo)

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following column is Part II 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 I** and **Part III**.

NOTE FROM THE WRITER: In Part I, we were introduced to the new "worship war," a debate about the suitability of worship music based on a song's origins. We explored the issue's importance, highlighted some theological concerns, and assessed the root argument as well as some counterarguments. In Part II, we'll continue our investigation.

SHOULD WE SING *THOSE* SONGS?!

Another objection is that by singing songs with problematic sources, churches sanction that source. In other words, by singing "Graves into Gardens," churches show tacit support of Bethel Church. By singing "Shout to the Lord," they give Hillsong their stamp of approval.

Others allege that by leading or singing a song, they approve of that song. Nothing more, nothing less.

Plus, there's another angle to consider. When a pastor quotes a theologian, does that quote endorse the totality of the theologian's life and beliefs? I've heard teetotalers quote Martin Luther though he was unabashedly a heavy drinker. John Calvin is cited often in sermons, but these pastors don't sanction the execution of Servetus? I've even heard pastors quote non-Christians, not because the sources are infallible, but because they wrote or spoke something deemed beneficial to the gathered body of believers.

Supporting Questionable Theology?

G3's Scott Aniol, an outspoken critic of those songs, raises another objection: "When you buy their albums or sing their music, you are financially supporting questionable theology at best, and heretical theology at worst."

On the other hand, do Christians only engage in commerce with other Christians? Do we only purchase products from people within our denominations? The evidence doesn't seem to support this premise. What company manufactured your church microphones and sound systems? How about the TVs in your classrooms? Or the computers in your office? Was everything in your church sourced 100% from like-minded Christian companies? Unless you're Amish, this is highly unlikely, if not downright impossible.

And when we do engage in commerce with a company, does that mean, as Aniol suggests, that we financially support their beliefs? When I buy groceries at Kroger, am I complicit in spreading their agenda? How about Wal-Mart? Can I buy a good product from a store without being culpable for them selling questionable products or having political and moral affiliations different than my own?

And I'll be totally honest: I don't have a problem with my money going to those with whom I disagree. I'll buy bread from a Buddhist so he can feed his family. I'll hire a Muslim electrician. I'll gladly pay an atheist or agnostic to work on my car or build my home. I'm unalarmed, therefore, if a few cents go to Hillsong each time I sing "King of Kings."

Aniol voices another objection. When we sing those songs, "weaker Christians might listen to other songs from these groups and be influenced by their poor theology."

Matthew D. Westerholm counters by suggesting churches don't "forbid singing Isaac Watts's hymns upon the fear that a church attender will read the copyright and author…and be led into Arianism," a heresy rejected in the 4th Century Watts apparently embraced.

Todd Wagner, Senior Pastor of Watermark Community Church in Dallas, makes a distinction, however: "While it's unlikely that many today will dig up Horatio Spafford sermons if they sing 'It Is Well,' many people will want to know more about Bethel's 'supernatural school of ministry' because of their excellent music." Besides, in this Digital Age, Bethel's podcasts, sermons, and songs are more accessible than information about Horatio Spafford.

Adam Stanford, Minister of Music and Media at First Baptist Church, Medina, Tennessee, shows how this influence could be inadvertent: "If we introduce a song that is theologically sound, a member likes it and listens to it on Spotify, then Spotify will suggest similar songs. If it was from a questionable current source, questionable songs will soon follow."

The Rabbit Trail

You can understand why this concern is sometimes called the "rabbit trail" or "gateway drug" argument: Good, harmless music may lead to destructive content.

But how do we apply this standard consistently? Do we avoid all references to topics with the potential to lead our attendees to questionable content? Praying for a president could motivate someone to research his political affiliations and switch parties. Mentioning specific sins could awaken temptation and lead to immoral behavior. These are outlandish examples, I know, but they illustrate the logical challenge of the "rabbit trail" objection: Every facet of worship has the potential to become a sinful "rabbit trail" because Christians are still enticed by sin.

Plus, do we really have the power to ensure church members avoid objectional content merely by not singing those songs? I can watch a video clip from a reputable pastor on Facebook, but just a few moments later, Facebook's algorithm thinks I'll enjoy a video from someone I consider utterly insane. I can listen to any modern Christian music artist on Spotify, but Bethel and Elevation songs will soon follow. It seems unrealistic, therefore, to think we can safeguard everything our church members confront outside our church buildings—on their phones and computers, on their TVs, when reading books and magazines, or even in everyday conversation with their peers, simply by not singing those songs.

Equip Our People With the Truth

What we can do, however, is equip them with the truth. Sing the truth. Pray the truth. Read the truth. Preach the truth. Equip our people inside the church so that outside the church they have the means to clearly distinguish truth from error.

As you can see, this issue doesn't get easier as one delves in more deeply. There are so many angles to consider that it becomes a bit mind-numbing. Ultimately, local church leaders are in the best position to study these issues, consider their local context, and decide which songs aid a church's worship, and which songs are a hindrance.

In Part III, we'll consider some other common objections, see how hymnal editors of the past handled this issue, and conclude with some final observations and encouragements. B&R

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