

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Worship War – 3:

Should We Sing *Those* Songs?

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1



(Unsplash photo)

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following column is Part III of a three-part series. The other two parts are available here: [Part I](#) and [Part II](#).

NOTE FROM THE WRITER: In Part I and Part II, 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 a few common objections. In Part III, we’ll see how hymnal editors treated this issue in the past, address some other concerns, and draw some final conclusions.

HOW DID HYMNAL EDITORS OF PRIOR GENERATIONS HANDLE THIS ISSUE?

Charles Spurgeon offered the following in a hymnal he curated: “A good hymn is not rejected by the character of its author, or the heresies of the church in whose hymnal it first occurred; so long as the language and the spirit commended the hymn to our heart, we included it, and believe we have enriched our collection thereby.”

John Rippon, in his supplement to Watts’s *Psalms and Hymns* wrote, “It has not been my Enquiry, *whose* Hymns shall I choose, but *what* Hymns; and hence it will be seen that

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Churchmen and Dissenters, Watts and Tate, Wesley and Toplady, England and America sing Side by Side, and very often join in the same Triumph, using the same Words.”



In fact, I combed through dozens of hymnal prefaces and introductions. None seemed to factor the ethics or theological framework of the composer or denomination to determine a hymn’s suitability. Instead, each hymn was judged on its own merit.

2

FALSE TEACHERS

Some argue that by singing *those songs*, we disobey the biblical command to avoid false teachers. As a dear brother in Christ explained to me over lunch, “When we flash the copyright info for a Bethel song on our screens, we essentially bring false teachers into our house.”

Now I don’t anticipate any Southern Baptist churches hosting Bethel’s Bill Johnson to preach any time soon. But is singing a biblically truthful song written by a composer associated with Bethel identical to hosting Johnson? Is briefly flashing “Hillsong Publishing” on our screens before we sing “Shout to the Lord” equivalent to Brian Houston teaching our churches? Though both instances may be judged out-of-bounds by a local church, I’m not convinced they’re one and the same.

HERETICAL CHURCHES

Another consideration is whether *those songs* are from heretical churches that teach a false gospel or from a stream within Christianity with differing doctrinal distinctives? Stated simply: are the writers of *those songs* Christians, or are they heretics? “Lost” or “saved”? Is Steven Furtick a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” or a brother in Christ with whom we have considerable theological disagreement?

Some, like Brandon Sickling, Worship Pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Cunningham, Kentucky, argue emphatically, “I don’t want to teach the sheep the songs of wolves!” Others suggest we are far too quick to cry “wolf!” Consider “grave soaking,” for example, something I find foolish, bizarre, and even a bit creepy. But as Westerholm reminds us, “Christians have practiced similar actions for centuries in what is known as ‘relic adoration.’ As a happy Protestant, I condemn the practice ... [but] I hesitate to label them occult or demonic.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Others point out that—despite theological differences — Bethel, Hillsong, Elevation, and Jesus Culture are filled with professing Christians. Their leaders teach salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. They would affirm historic summaries of the Christian faith like The Apostle’s Creed. Is this enough, or do we expect those who write our songs to be nearer our Southern Baptist convictions as outlined in the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message? In other words, do we have enough in common to share songs (the ones that match our theology), or are our theological frameworks so dissimilar that we should distance ourselves altogether?

3

If your church believes those within Bethel and Hillsong are “wolves” and heretics, not singing *those songs* may be an easy decision. If you consider them brothers and sisters in Christ, however, singing their songs may prove a non-issue.

We’ve walked through, around, and *stepped into* this topic thoroughly, meticulously, and maybe even nauseatingly. Allow me to conclude with some final reflections and a summary of my own position.

MY PERSONAL POSITION

Biblical content is non-negotiable. Though we may disagree about the significance of a song’s source, sound content is essential. Our prayers, songs, sermons, and everything else we do, must mirror biblical truth without any hint of error.

Context is crucial. Your church is different from the one across the street, which is unlike the one across the state. Songs that distract in your context may be acceptable elsewhere. Make decisions that fit your church and trust the Holy Spirit to guide the one down the road.

This is a local church decision. Each autonomous church can evaluate this issue to determine whether singing *those songs* is beneficial or harmful. Establishing a general church policy, written or unwritten, on this matter may prove beneficial.

Some within the same congregation may disagree. This won’t be the first time, and certainly won’t be the last, that Baptists will disagree about an issue. Pray together and pursue unity. If you find agreement, fantastic! If not, rejoice over your salvation and celebrate the multitude of beliefs upon which you agree.

Show humility and graciousness. Christians will investigate this topic and come to drastically different conclusions. If it were clear-cut, followers of Jesus would find consensus—and it wouldn’t take a three-part series of articles to explain it! My friend, David Manner says it so well: “If one chooses to sing songs by certain authors or

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

composers and another chooses not to, it is a false dichotomy to claim one is or will be theologically suspect and the other righteous.”

So, whatever decision you make, I urge you: don't be haughty to those who differ.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, here is a summary of my own viewpoint: *A worship song is best judged on its own merit, rather than by its origins and affiliations. There are occasions, however, when a song's source may be so distracting as to render it unusable. This “line of suitability” is inexact and may be different for each context. Ultimately, therefore, it's best studied and determined by pastors and leaders God has called to shepherd the local church.*

May God bless you and your church as you worship him — whether you sing *those songs* ... or not. **B&R**



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