

Congregational song teaches fundamentals of faith

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WACO—Congregational singing offers one of the best ways for churches to teach theological truth, but its instructional element often is its most neglected aspect, a Baylor University professor of church music told an online audience.



David W. Music

“Those of us who lead the song ministry of the church have both a great responsibility and a great opportunity to help people know and understand the truth and mercy of the Lord,” David W. Music said.

“As biblical literacy declines in both the general and church populations, as doctrinal preaching and teaching is abandoned, and as private devotional reading dwindles, it may well be the songs of the church that offer the best hope for the continued growth of God’s people in the faith.”

“The Teaching Ministry of Congregational Song” was the topic of the [2021 Northcutt Lecture](#), sponsored by Baylor’s [Center for Christian Music Studies](#) and presented via Zoom teleconference on April 6.

“Throughout the Bible and Christian history, it has been recognized that song is one of the best and most effective means for teaching the fundamentals of the faith,” Music said.

In Deuteronomy 31, when God instructed Moses to provide the people of Israel a way of remembering their deliverance from bondage after their leader’s death, God commanded him to write a song that “shall not be

forgotten,” he noted. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul encouraged the Colossian church to teach and encourage each other “with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

Similarly, church leaders through the ages such as Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley all emphasized the teaching value of hymns, he added.

Why is hymn singing effective in teaching doctrine?

Music suggested six reasons congregational singing is an effective way to teach Christian truth:

- *Hymns combine theological ideas with the emotional power of poetry and music.* “People tend to remember things better when there is both a rational and an emotional component in what they are doing,” Music said. “If we want people to know and understand the principles of the Christian faith, one of the best ways to do so is to combine those truths with the emotional expression provided by poetry and music.”
- *Intentionally memorable form.* Meter, rhyme, repeated refrains and other elements of hymnody make the lyrics easier to remember.
- *Compression.* Hymns express profound theological truths in brief form that is “digestible” for easy consumption. “When we’re not in a pandemic, every Sunday morning, we sing theological treatises in a nutshell,” he observed.
- *Active participation.* “It is a well-known dictum in education that we learn best by doing,” Music said. Congregational singing involves worshippers is a multi-sensory exercise that involves mental and physical exertion.
- *Repeatability.* Frequent repetition ingrains information into

people's brains. "Preachers who preach an identical sermon seven or eight times in a year will soon be looking for a new pulpit. However, people do not seem to tire of singing the same songs many times over. In fact, the more they are repeated, the more quickly they seem to become old favorites," Music said.

- *Association with past experience.* "When a song or hymn is connected in our minds with a previous event or time in our life, it can be a powerful stimulus for remembering that song and its message," Music said.

Because congregational song is such a powerful tool for theological education, worship leaders have a solemn responsibility to use it wisely, he stressed.

What to consider in selecting hymns

Music offered five factors for worship planners to consider as they select congregational songs:

- *Songs must have something to say.* Minimalist songs may be effective in praise or fellowship, but they have little educational value. "As we choose songs for teaching, as we have a responsibility to do, we should ask ourselves: 'Does this song have a message? What does it tell us about the Christian faith?'"
- *Speak truth.* "Our songs do not have to be theologically profound, but they at least need to express truth," Music said. "They must be measured against the Scripture and the theological formations of our faith to ensure that what we are singing and learning is accurate and correct."
- *Pay attention to the words.* "If it is the music that gives life to the words, it is the text that gives meaning to the music and ultimately is the reason for its singing," he said.

- *Memorization.* As songs are memorized, they become internalized and can be called to mind readily.
- *Repetition.* “As leaders, we tend to want to sing new songs all the time, but congregants need significant repetition for the songs to become internalized and become meaningful carriers of belief and doctrine,” he said.

“We have in our hands a powerful tool,” Music concluded. “May God grant us the grace and wisdom to use it in a meaningful and effective manner.”

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