

Voices: What's wrong with our worship music?

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I like to joke with people that I only sing in public when I'm at church because the Holy Spirit is there to protect everyone.

I am not gifted musically. I do not play any instruments, and I long since have lost whatever meager singing skills I may have gained through a couple years of choir in middle school and high school.

Nevertheless, as a Christian and a pastor, I am passionate about worship music. Sadly, this passion often manifests as deep concern and even anger over the state of modern worship music in American evangelical churches.

This article is not just a rant, however. I want to explain the problems I see in modern worship music and propose something better.

Trends in modern worship music

I can boil down my concerns about modern worship by highlighting two primary trends in popular contemporary worship music's form and content.

Regarding form, many churches have started making their worship services more like concerts. I have nothing against concerts, including Christian concerts. And I think it's good for musicians to help lead local congregations in singing songs of praise to God.

I do have a big problem, however, with treating local church worship like it's a concert. The house lights are down, the stage lights are up. The musicians on the stage are amplified so loudly they almost completely drown out the congregation. The focus no longer is on the congregation's

singing together, but on the musicians' performance.

Worse, however, is the lyrical content of much modern worship music. Groups like Hillsong, Bethel and Elevation [dominate the market](#) when it comes to new worship songs. Their lyrics are all similar and bad.

Take Hillsong's "Oceans," for example. "Oceans" is one of the most popular worship songs of the past 10 years and is a fair representation of many new worship songs today. "Oceans'" [lyrics](#) contain no explicit references to Jesus Christ, Christ's death on the cross for our sins, the resurrection or any other key Christian doctrines.

[Other popular](#) worship [songs may](#) at least [mention](#) Jesus, but they aren't much better. Their lyrics focus on subjects like emotional comfort, personal validation, success and "blessing." Much of modern worship lyrics are just prosperity gospel and cut-rate therapy.

Scripture's paradigm

What is worship music supposed to look and sound like, then? There is not nearly enough space in this article for a full biblical analysis of this question, but we can find answers by focusing on Scripture's main paradigm of worship music and a couple biblical precepts.

The main paradigm the Bible gives us for worship music is the book of Psalms. Both Jews and Christians have been singing the Psalms for thousands of years. The psalter could be called Christianity's only divinely inspired hymnal. The Psalms stand far above any other worship songs humans have ever written, as the Psalms are from God himself.

Even though there is no biblical text explicitly mandating all worship songs must resemble the Psalms, the fact the Psalms are inspired worship songs should make us see them as instructive for the content of the songs we

write today.

When you read the Psalms, you see rich theological content (Psalm 110), rehearsals of biblical history (Psalm 78), a focus on God's glory (Psalm 24) and topics many modern worship songs don't address much, such as lament (Psalm 88) and the value of God's law (Psalm 119).

Scripture's precepts

Regarding biblical precepts, one of the most important passages is Colossians 3:16 and its parallel, Ephesians 5:19.

Paul writes: "Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (CSB).

Two main ideas stick out from Paul's words. First, Christian singing is a form of teaching. We use worship songs to teach one another the Bible and sound doctrine. Second, Christian singing is to be focused on God, expressing our gratitude to him and giving him glory, rather than emphasizing ourselves.

Another biblical precept for worship is found in 1 Corinthians 14:1-25. Paul is confronting excesses in the Corinthians' worship services, particularly the Corinthians' focus on their own individual edification and glorification.

Paul commands the members of the Corinthian church to focus on building up others instead of themselves through their worship practices.

"[S]eek to excel in building up the church ... in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order to teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (14:12, 19).

Modern worship that bucks the trend

Much of modern worship music falls woefully short of Scripture's vision. Lyrics often are shallow biblically and theologically, or sometimes even heretical. Many churches' worship services really are just concerts that put the focus on the musicians on the stage. Service planners frequently prioritize listeners' personal tastes above all else.

But these problems, widespread as they are, are not universal among American evangelical churches. Many congregations focus on actual congregational singing rather than trying to emulate a concert. And plenty of modern worship songs are full of biblically and theologically rich lyrics that also are beautifully written.

"Yet Not I but Through Christ in Me" by CityAlight, [released](#) in 2018, is one of my all-time favorite worship songs. Many of my church members, who grew up on classic hymns, love it, too. "Christ Our Hope in Life and Death" by Getty Music was a sweet, [beautiful balm](#) for my soul in the midst of COVID. And there are [many more songs like](#) them.

A great book recently published on this subject is Matt Merker's *Corporate Worship: How the Church Gathers as God's People*. The truth is many of the worst trends in modern worship music are downstream from bad theology and pragmatism. But it doesn't have to be this way.

A biblical vision of gathered worship will strengthen our worship music and, more importantly, bring glory to God.

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