Today's Worship Music: Adapting or Conforming?
Dr. Steve Mathewson

In the quest to reach a pagan culture for Christ and to lead believers in fresh, genuine worship of God, IFCA International church leaders face a critical question regarding today's worship music. Does contemporary worship music adapt to our culture within biblical guidelines, or does it err in conforming to the world (Romans 12:2)? To put the question another way, how do we shape a music ministry in our churches which is fresh and relevant but which avoids compromising to the whims of secular culture? We face this question whenever we choose church musicians, when we decide what instruments to use in our worship, when we determine what style of music these musicians and instruments will use, and when we select music for worship services.

Like it or not, it's impossible to answer this question by making blanket statements about Christian music because there are so many different types of songs, musical styles, and musicians. Instead, IFCA International church leaders must filter their evaluation of today's worship music through the grid of biblical principles. This article explores three biblical principles which should shape our response to today's worship music.

Sing a New Song

To begin with, Scripture mandates the use of new songs in worship. Psalm 149:1 says: "Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints" (NIV). Likewise, Psalms 96 and 98 both begin with the command: "Sing to the LORD a new song" (see also Psalms 33:1;40:3; 144:9). The Hebrew term translated "new" refers to something fresh or recent and is related to the word "new moon." In the great throne-room scene in Revelation 5, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders fall down before the Lamb and sing a new song (Revelation 5:8-9). The Greek term for "new" refers to something "recently made, not yet used, fresh." New songs are necessary as new generations of believer experience God's marvelous works in their lives (Psalms 98:1 and 144:9-10).

If we take the Bible seriously, then, we must not discriminate against today's worship music simply because it is new. The temptation is to canonize a collection of hymns from a previous era and say, "There, we have enough music, and no one can improve on these songs anyway."

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During a typical Sunday morning worship service at the church I pastor, it is not uncommon for us to sing songs like "Be Thou My Vision" from the 700s, "A Mighty Fortress" from the 1500s, "Holy, Holy, Holy" from the 1800s, "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High from the 1980s, "You are My All in All" from the 1990s, and "Take My Life" from the 1990s. Such a blend shows appreciation for the new songs from all eras of church history. God has not confined gifted teachers and musicians to a particular era.

Pay Attention to the Content

If we plan to use new songs, though, we must insist that they conform to Biblical standards. By far, the most pressing criterion for evaluating today's worship music relates to content. Does a song possess
doctrinal integrity? Do the lyrics speak of God and His relationship to His people with accuracy and clarity?

In Ephesians 5:18-19, the Apostle Paul indicates that being filled with the Spirit involves "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."

This statement offers three categories related to content. The psalms, of course, consist of words taken directly from Scripture. Hymns direct praise to God and focus on His attributes. Spiritual songs speak more of a believer's experience or aspirations as a child of God.

When evaluating today's worship music by its content, I am intrigued that it roughly resembles the content of songs in the edition of Inspiring Hymns which my IFCA International church used during my childhood. Quite frankly, there is a mixed assortment from outstanding to trite to doctrinally incorrect. I once heard Dr. Lehman Strauss say he'd like to write a book on "Humbugs in the Hymnal." I suppose I could add a companion volume titled "Blurry Songs on the Projection Screen." The fact is, every era of music has a mixed blend of home runs as well as humbugs.

Overall, though, I am delighted with the number of outstanding worship songs written in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the great strides in today's worship music is using language directly from the Psalms in songs like "God is the Strength of My Heart" (Psalm 73:25-26) or "It is Good to Praise the Lord" (Psalm 92:1-2). Other songs fall into the "hymn category." They may not contain as many stanzas as Charles Wesley's hymns, but they communicate rich theological truth. I appreciate songs like "We Believe" and "Now Unto the King Eternal" which is taken almost verbatim from Paul's doxology in 1 Timothy 1:17.

Numerous other songs offer praise to God for His attributes, including "Firm Foundation," "We Declare Your Majesty" and "Shout to the Lord." In the past few weeks, I find myself praying often the words of "Take My Life" (also known as "Holiness").

Holiness, holiness is what I long for.  
Holiness, holiness is what I need.  
Holiness, holiness is what You want from me.  
Take my heart and form it.  
Take my mind and transform it.  
Take my will and conform it  
To You, to You, oh Lord.

While today's worship music is sometimes criticized for its depth, I find much more depth in many of the newer songs than in "approved oldies" like "Pass It On," "Do Lord" or "Somewhere in Outer Space."

**Appreciate Various Styles**

Now once a song has been evaluated by its content, the controversial question of style surfaces. Is it alright for the music to have a contemporary beat? What about using synthesizers, guitars, and even drums?

Recently, I heard a godly preacher and close friend lament the use of dance-hall drums in a church where he candidated. I wondered to myself why he rejects dance-hall drums but doesn't mind the dance-hall pianos which grace the platforms of most church facilities today. We forget that instruments and styles accepted as "sacred" today stirred controversy when first introduced.

Take the organ as an example. Because the Roman hydraulis or water organ was used with pagan rites, games and theatre, Jerome warned in the 4th century that Christian virgins should be deaf to its music. When the organ was introduced to churches in Colonial America, many worshippers called it "the devil's box of whistles."
Song styles caused controversy, too. In pre-reformation days, the Roman churches preferred singing in unison. Harmony was allowed if the interval was an open fifth (for example, a "C" and a "G"), but an open third (a "C" and an "E") was considered a "sensuous interval." When Martin Luther wrote his hymns, he used a musical style which resembled the tavern songs of his day rather than the Gregorian chants. In 19th century America, hymns often reflected the parlour music style popularized by Stephen Foster. J. Edwin Orr's hymn text, "Search Me, O God," was written in the early 1940s and was set to the same tune as a love song, "Now is the Hour," which reached the top of the Lucky Strike Hit Parade.

The fact is, worship music in every era has borrowed the styles of popular culture. So what does the Bible say? As one of my seminary Hebrew professors pointed out to me, all the instruments listed in Psalm 150 had their origin in pagan nations and were first used in pagan worship. Yet God commanded Israel to use those same instruments in the worship of himself. According to Psalm 150, there's room for brass, strings, percussion, and winds. Furthermore, worship in the Psalms is exuberant and enthusiastic. Psalm 100 calls believers to shout for joy, worship with gladness, and come with joyful songs. Somber is not more sacred than music with a distinct beat.

Scripture gives believers freedom in the area of style. To be honest, the fuss about worship styles is due mainly to preference, not to theology. This is a key area of church life in which Christians must practice love. We must learn to use and appreciate styles which may not always fit our tastes. This goes for senior saints as well as senior high saints. Worship leaders should not alienate traditionalists by disregarding their tastes. But neither should traditionalists alienate new believers or believers from a younger generation by refusing to allow worship songs which conform to their preferences.

Pastors and worship leaders must commit to stretching a congregation without splitting it. Sensitive creativity is the key. Introduce a new song every month. Choose music from every era in church history. Revive an old hymn by playing it with a more contemporary sound. Take the time to tell the story behind a hymn like "Come, Thou Fount" and explain unfamiliar expressions like "Here I raise my Ebenezer" or "Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to Thee."

When designing outreach events such as crusades, men's or women's retreats, VBS, or camp programs, leaders must exercise even more effort to use music which will effectively reach non-believers.

Evaluating today's worship music forces believers to think biblically. It requires us to base our choices on biblical principles - not on personal biases or comfort zones. May Jesus Christ be praised by the kind of music we use in our churches and by the attitudes which accompany its use.

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